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Mahadevi Verma

A TRIBUTE TO PRASAD

Translated by
Karine Schomer

(This brief tribute to Prasad is part of a 1956 collection of Mahadevi Verma's reminiscences about fellow Hindi writers entitled Path ke sāthī (Companions on the Road). Mahadevi was a younger contemporary of Prasad and one of the other major poets of the Chayāvād movement. The piece is therefore of interest as an expression of what Prasad meant to his peers. It is written in the elevated prose style which was in favor with that generation of Hindi writers, yet manages to convey a powerful sense of intimacy.)

The essay focuses on Prasad's qualities as a human being and the significance of his life, though there is some discussion of his works as well, particularly Kāmāyanī. It moves back and forth between statements about Prasad as a towering literary figure and poignant glimpses of Prasad the man, humble in manner and beset on all sides by insurmountable practical problems.

In the process of recounting the story of Prasad's struggles, Mahadevi chides the Hindi world for its indifference to the economic plight of writers--a plight which had led her to establish a writers' aid project in Allahabad. She also makes gentle fun of the noisy institutions of public literary life in the Hindi world and of the grandiose self-images which writers and poets tend to project--herself and Prasad included. The bulk of the essay is very serious, however, and explores Prasad's life in terms of his achievements and his struggles. She is most moved by his struggle with tuberculosis and the courage with which he faced death, while her most effusive praise naturally goes to his Kāmāyanī, which she perceives as having given voice to "the collective thoughts and feelings which were silently welling up in our hearts and minds.")

Whenever I remember our great poet, Prasad, a particular image comes to my mind. A fir tree stands on the slope of the Himalayas, straight and tall as the proud mountain peaks themselves. Its lofty head braves the

assaults of the snow, the rain and the blazing heat of the sun. Violent storms shake its spreading branches, while a thin stream of water plays hide-and-peek among its roots. Even under the most icy snowfall, the most fierce heat and the most torrential rain, the fir tree holds its head high. Even in the midst of the worst thunderstorms and blizzards, it remains steady and unflinching. But one day, as it is rearing its head into the sky like the victor in a prolonged struggle, measuring its height against that of the sun-drenched, snow-capped peaks, something unexpected happens. Inch by inch, the soft tickling strokes of that insignificant stream of water have been hollowing out the soil beneath the tree's roots, and as a result that tall fir in its moment of final victory crashes to the ground, rending the atmosphere and the very heavens as it falls.

My picture of Prasad is based on his writings, a few hours' acquaintance with him, and the various stories which circulate about him. Since it was the age of *Chāyāvād*, I could not help but be familiar with his writings, and in terms of distance, Benares was not far from Allahabad. Yet for some unknown reason, I saw him for the first and last time only in 1936, when he was writing the second canto of *Kāmarāyanī* and I had just completed my *Sāndhya gīta*.¹ Even that one glimpse of him was not in the thunderous altercation of an all-India literary conference, nor in the cacophonous bedlam of an all-India *kavi-sammelan*. Nor was he buried under a torrent of public speeches or clouds of welcoming garlands. Our meeting in Benares was wonderfully prosaic.

The train between Allahabad and Bhagalpur² was sometimes routed through Benares, and I once decided to break my journey there in order to visit Prasad. I was totally unfamiliar with the streets and narrow alleys of Benares, and so was the servant accompanying me. Assuming that everyone must know the poet Prasad, I asked several *tongā* drivers if they could take me to his place. Receiving blank responses, I was about to give up and return to the waiting room when one of the men spoke up: "Is it the Snuff Man's place you want to go to?" I thought he must be referring to some merchant who was a habitual user of that foul-smelling tobacco powder known as snuff. Wanting to find out more precisely, I asked: "What does the Snuff Man do for a living?" Upon hearing that this gentleman ran a tobacco store, I became needlessly irritated at the *tongā* driver. How could a great poet like Prasad do anything as prosaic as running a tobacco store? I muttered: "I don't want to go to any rich tobacco dealer's place! The man I am looking for writes poetry!" The *tongā* driver was more determined than most and was not yet ready to admit defeat. "Our Snuff Man too writes lots of famous poems!" he insisted. I reflected on the matter. A snuff merchant famous for writing poems might well be acquainted with Prasad. Going to his place to make inquiries was certainly better than sitting at the station for hours.

The narrow alleyways of Benares seem to cut up the sky into strips of blue cloth. Whenever I enter them, I feel as if I am wandering about in the belly of a huge snake which has swallowed up not only me but several shops as well, and blocked off the exit by closing its mouth. I rode in the *tongā* as far as it would go, continued on foot for some distance, and finally came up to a white stucco house whose appearance was neither striking nor utterly plain. I sent in word that I was Mahadevi, come from Allahabad.

I figured that if the master of the house was indeed Prasad, he would no doubt be familiar with my name, and if it turned out to be some snuff merchant, he would at least come to the door out of courtesy.

Prasad himself emerged from the house. Pictures I had seen of him gave him the hale and hearty appearance of a Buddhist monk, but in person he seemed neither hale nor hearty. Of medium height, neither frail nor heavy-set, he was a fair-skinned man with a fine high forehead, dark brown hair which was neither very thick nor too sparse, a rather wide mouth and a small well-shaped nose, luminous eyes, and a pleasant, spontaneous smile. He was wearing a white homespun *dhoti* and *kurtā*. In his presence I felt the kind of serenity one experiences in a newly whitewashed room decorated with plain white flowers.

Upon seeing my image of Prasad as a Buddhist monk destroyed, I felt like having a good laugh. When I further realized that he was himself the Snuff Man, I could no longer contain my laughter. I used to laugh a lot in those days, even though everyone imagined me to be a woeful figure who spoke in hushed tones and moved about soundlessly, gazing at the sky with eyes full of tears. Seeing me laugh and realizing the incongruity between my demeanor and my ponderous name, Prasad too began to laugh heartily. "You don't look like 'Mahadevi' at all!" he exclaimed. "Well," I retorted in the same jocular tone, "you don't look much like those monkish 'Prasad the Poet' pictures of you either!"

There was nothing in Prasad's sitting room which might even remotely be considered decorative. The room contained the standard wooden platform, two or three straight chairs, a few pictures on the wall, and a cupboard with some books in it. If I had expected the home of such a famous poet to be unusual in any way, I would have been greatly disappointed.

He was working on the second canto of *Kāmāyanī* at the time. When I asked him about his current writing, he recited for me a few sections of the first canto. The Vedas contain several narrative episodes which are highly dramatic and an excellent epic poem could have been written on any one of them. I was curious to know why he had chosen a story with such an abstract plot. In response to my question, he spoke at some length about the overall conception of his *Kāmāyanī*. In his judgment, the story lines of the more dramatic narratives had hardened to the point where it would be difficult to bend them to his philosophical outlook. Contemporary problems can be expressed through ancient forms, but the ancient vessel will shape itself to the new content only if the clay is still soft. An ancient tale whose contours have hardened is no longer flexible enough to take on a new appearance. Thus, he found the figure of Indra at once attractive and mysterious, but unfit to carry the message of *Kāmāyanī* because of the dramatic and rather coarse nature of most of the stories associated with him.

He also explained to me his theory about the evolution of the figure of Varuna in the Vedic period. Vedic literature and Indian philosophy have always been my favorite subjects, so I naturally had many questions to ask. In the course of our discussion, I came to realize that Prasad was fully conversant with modern scholarship in these areas, but also had creative interpretations of his own. He also had the ability to convey

much in just a few words--an ability seldom found in any of our writers. Though his learning is evident from his writings alone, it is the succinct and forthright way in which he could set forth his views on philosophy, history and literature which never failed to amaze those who heard him speak.

The time came for me to return to the station. As I took leave of Prasad, I found it hard to believe that I had first met him only a few hours earlier. He accompanied me back to the *tongā* and stood there watching until we had drifted out of sight. That was my last glimpse of this literary elder brother, for he never travelled anywhere and I myself was soon to withdraw from public literary life.³

Shortly thereafter the news came that Prasad was critically ill. For a long time no one knew what the disease was. When it was finally diagnosed as tuberculosis, the Hindi literary world showed no particular concern. In this scientific age, tuberculosis is fatal only for those who have no means and no one realized that Prasad was too poor to afford proper treatment. Until the very end, everyone was confident that he would be cured. He died while the Hindi literary world was celebrating the publication of his *Kāmayānī*.

I myself was suffering from a fever at the time. Word was brought in to me that someone had arrived with an urgent message. I dragged myself out of bed and came to the door. When I heard that Prasad was no longer, I was stunned and reached out to the door for support. It took me a few moments to fully absorb the news and then a few more to collect myself. I became haunted by the memory of my last glimpse of him and also by that image of the tall fir tree gradually brought down by the trickle of an insignificant stream of water.

Prasad's personal life was more lonely than that of any other contemporary Hindi writer. He was born into a family which was well-to-do but saddled with heavy debts. As a child he received more than his share of love and affection, for he was the youngest. He spent his adolescence in the cultivation of both physical fitness and the life of the mind, wrestling and eating nourishing food on the one hand, and studying Sanskrit, Persian and English on the other. His adolescence was marred, however, by the bitter experience of family disputes. In addition, the whole burden of responsibility for his family's finances and debts came to rest on his young shoulders. It was as if he were being made to pay a price for all the affection, physical health and education he had enjoyed. By the time he was a young man, he had lost both of his parents, his elder brother, two wives and a son. This chain of bereavements undergone between infancy and young adulthood must have deeply wounded his sensitive personality. To imagine otherwise is to ignore human nature, especially if the human being in question is a talented writer and poet.

It was no doubt the effort to retain his equanimity in the midst of all these inner and outer conflicts which led Prasad to develop his personal philosophy of joy tempered by compassion. Nor is there any doubt but that it was his inner grief, smoldering like a volcano under the moonlight, which gradually reduced his being to ashes. This inner grief was also at the root

of his introspective tendency and his reserve. Individuals brought up in an atmosphere of family discord and with a strong sense of social standing are often reticent. If they must bear in addition a heavy burden of responsibility, this diffidence causes them to draw a sharp line between their inner feelings and their outer circumstances. Like a rock being chipped away at bit by bit, Prasad's life force slowly declined. He triumphed over all the outer struggles in his life, but in his moment of victory lost the very life he had put at stake.

Tuberculosis is not a disease which strikes suddenly, but rather the result of protracted ill health. Prasad was constantly sick, yet he remained active. On the one hand, he kept on trying to set his worldly affairs in order, while on the other he worked on *kāmyāni*, giving concrete and moving form to his philosophy of life. The diagnosis of his illness put before him a choice between two alternatives, for the treatment of tuberculosis is very expensive. Sometimes the disease is not treated until it is too late, and as a result the victim's family must endure the double burden of bereavement and penury. Prasad had one adolescent son and remembered well the struggles of his own adolescence. He did not want to cast a dark cloud over the boy's future by leaving him with the same heavy burden of responsibility he himself had borne as an adolescent. His only other alternative was to relinquish the helm and cast the boat of his life upon the sea, letting it drift on its own towards one shore or the other. With dauntless courage, he chose this alternative and did not deviate from it even when he heard the approaching footsteps of death.

This story of Prasad's struggle with life and death is a moving one, but it raises an important question in our minds. Did such a great artist have no close friend who could have tried to prevent this unequal encounter? Perhaps there was no senior member of his family whose decision on the matter would have been final, or else the family could not overcome his stubborn concern for his son's welfare. But did he have no true and loyal friends who could have triumphed over his obstinacy by their loving insistence and made available to him a place of cure and treatment by specialists? If we judge by what happened, we will have to conclude that he did not. It is easy to attend convivial gatherings and exchange pleasantries with a friend who is well off, cheerful and loquacious, but reading portents of death in the dull eyes of a friend stricken by a contagious disease and risking something to save him is very difficult.

An individual as strong-minded and reserved as Prasad would never have thought of asking anyone for love and sympathy. In *Candragupta*, Singharana makes the following statement:

"Human nature ultimately rebels at having to ask repeatedly for help, for there is a certain pride involved in friendship and trust. When this happens, a man throws himself blindly into life-and-death struggle, no matter how much he may be inclined to avoid it. He says, 'I will do nothing to protect myself! Let those who are my friends come forward and prove themselves!'"

These words may well express something of Prasad's own sentiments. He too appears to have fought blindly and made no effort to save his own life. It is often the case in life that one person's interests are in conflict with those of another, and there are people whose memories of Prasad have more to do with their own grievances than with his unique qualities.

Prasad was the first writer since Bharatendu⁴ to have made his genius felt in many different areas of literature. His poetry is diverse, including tender musical lyrics and longer narrative poems, as well as compositions in blank verse and free verse. His short fiction ranges from exquisite short stories to a variety of longer narratives, while his novelistic genius extends to both the harsh urban reality of *Kankāl* and the rural lyricism of *Titlī*. In his one-act plays, allegorical plays, musical dramas and historical dramas, he has treated a wide variety of dramatic situations. His essays, finally, are as distinguished as those of any profound philosophical thinker.

Prasad's literary genius was matched by an equally unusual spirit of practical enterprise. In order to focus attention on the poetry and thought of the emerging new age, he brought into being magazines such as *Indu* and *Jāgarana*.⁵ *Bharati Bhandar*⁶ is a product of this same practical sense which enabled him to see the possibilities of the times and put them to good use. Looking at his life in terms of his accomplishments reminds us of the old notion of the ocean contained within a small water-jar.

His greatest contribution to our excessively rationalistic age is of course his *Kāmāyanī*. It is important not only for its poetic beauty, but also for its balanced philosophy of life. There is a close interrelation between a person's feelings and the philosophy which naturally develops from them. The surface of a river seems to be constantly changing, the water at different points along its course being sometimes rough and choppy and at other times calm or sluggish. But it does not flow in a vacuum. Deep below the endlessly moving water, the bed of the river is one. And though it is impossible to arrest and bind the rain water as it comes down from the sky, yet it somehow makes its way to the river banks that will hold it. The same is true of human feelings. A person whose feelings are not gathered up into a unifying world-view may be said to be like the rain water in the sky. If a life is to flow along a meaningful course and move from initial isolation to a final merging into totality, it must be informed by a philosophy which can make the true, the good and the beautiful be seen as one. Any current of feeling which lacks this kind of philosophical grounding is apt to be highly impermanent. But such a philosophy cannot be fully articulated within the compass of the lyric form. It requires the breadth of the epic. *Kāmāyanī* made known the philosophical grounding and orientation of that flood tide of feeling which swept over every aspect of life during the *Chāyāvād* age.

It is becoming fashionable to consider Prasad an advocate of the philosophical point of view which sees joy as the underlying reality of all things. But no great poet can ever accept this as the whole truth, for the creative impulse stems from a longing for ever greater harmony, which is just another way of saying perpetual dissatisfaction. *Kāmāyanī* ends with the words "And there was joy, deep and unending." This may describe the ultimate goal of universal life, but a poet must strive unceasingly to bring about its fulfillment. A string instrument which has achieved a

state of equanimity would be one which makes no sound, for it is in response to a series of strokes that it produces a certain combination of notes and brings music to people's ears. If both the stroke and the pause between strokes become reduced to silence, or to a single sound, neither melody nor rhythm can exist. Prasad's life, his leanings towards Buddhism, his final renunciation, the tender self-sacrificing characters he created, the note of compassion which rings out again and again in his writings--all these things prove that he was like a finely tuned instrument whose taut strings reverberate to even the faintest of tremors.

Prasad spoke for our age, voicing in stirring words the collective thoughts and feelings which were silently welling up in our hearts and minds. But when she who blesses poets called out to him from that "lofty Himalayan peak" to reward him for his devotion, he had already laid down his instrument and passed into silence.

NOTES

1. *Sāndhya gīta* was Mahadevi's fourth published collection of lyrics.
2. Mahadevi's parents lived in Bhagalpur (Bihar) and she went there frequently to visit them.
3. After an unpleasant incident in an all-India *kavi-sammelan* in 1936, Mahadevi made the decision to take no more part in public literary functions--a decision which she adhered to for many years.
4. "Bharatendu" Hariścandra (1850-1885) was the first great figure in modern Hindi literature.
5. *Indu* was a magazine which Prasad put out almost singlehandedly from 1909 to 1916 as a vehicle for the expression of his novel literary ideas. *Jāgarana* was a short-lived but important venture by Prasad and several of the other leading writers of Benares and ran from 1932 to 1934.
6. Bharati Bhandar was a Hindi publishing house founded by Prasad in Benares in 1928, the first to pay royalties to writers. It was later merged into Allahabad's Leader Press.