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Sahitya Akademi

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meet the author

Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya





"I have always 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," said Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya in 1980. It was this very streak of the rebel that wouldn't let him oblige the bureaucracy of the All India Radio, two decades earlier, by dropping the poem "Naganir Chitthi" (Letter from a Naga woman) 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 that Acharya Vinoba Bhave felt that "Dhirendra" would be more appropriate a name for him than "Birendra". Coming from a poor family Birendra had often to go to school on an empty stomach; even while Bhattacharyya was earning, he had to be content with two sets of clothes and a second-hand Army overcoat, and his wife had to make do with only one sari for some days. He braved all this but never gave up writing.

He wrote twenty novels, sixty short stories, a hundred poems, ten plays and innumerable essays and articles, besides translating classics from Bengali and English into Assamese. Not all his writings have been published in book form: many are scattered over the pages of newspapers, journals and periodicals.

Bhattacharyya began writing poems and short stories in his teens. At college in Guwahati one of his short stories won him a Prize. At thirty-seven, he won the Sahitya Akademi Award; at fifty-five the Jnanpith Award; he became the Vice-President of the Sahitya Akademi at fifty-nine, and President at sixty-four—a remarkable journey from humble beginnings in a remote village of Assam to the highest literary office of the country.

The fruit of a three-year stint as a science teacher in a "venture school" in the distant Naga village Ukhrul, near Burma border, the Sahitya Akademi Award winning novel *Iyaruingham* deals with the life of the Tangkhul Nagas as no anthropologist but only a literary master could. R.K. Dasgupta says, "Birendra Kumar presents the Nagas as a part of the human situation in our country with an imaginative sympathy and understanding which go into the making of a great work of art."

In 1942 Bhattacharyya saw the Barpathar railway derailment caused by freedom fighters, and twenty-eight years later wove a novel around it, *Mrityunjaya*, which won for him the Jnanpith Award. Maheshwar Neog finds it "a characteristically representative work" of the novelist and observes:

"The plot of the novel brings into play the stir that was going on in the Nowgong district of the martyrs, Bhogeswari Phukanani and Tilak Deka. . . . It is this stirred heart of the people which refuses to die in spite of the death of the principal characters—the saintly Chaitanyaite Mahat Goswami and the irreverent and raw rustic Dhanpur who operate the Panikhaiti derailment of military-carrying railway train killing hundreds of soldiers—and

the imprisonment of their comrades, Rupnarayan, Ahina Kowar and others. It is this collective spirit of the people which is deathless—*mrityunjaya*; it conquers death. . . .

"The principal characters of the novel are magnificently developed into individuals with each a mind and heart of his or her own. The sumtotal of conflicts that rage in their minds. . . make for quite a strong undercurrent of thought on religion and morality, politics and society. This gives them their tone and colour. The writer, however, nowhere comes out with his own views, or works them out through any particular character. . . There is a glimpse of tribal life too and a lovable tribal soul in the person of Dimi, who brings a whiff of fresh air with her love and elemental simplicity and her strength of mind and character into tense situations. . . .

"Nature contributes charmingly well to the making of *Mrityunjaya*. The rivers and trees and green-covered hills of Assam enter the human tale in a large measure without the author waiting in the midst of his narrative and attempting to paint for us the whole panorama. Even birds (like the Lakshmi owl in Mahat Goswami's ashram and the sleek-plumed unknown bird resting over his head when he was keeping his gun in position to shoot at the army watchman at Panikhaiti) and beasts (like the antlered deer crying in the forest, portending sadness, and Goswami's cow mooing off and on after her calf had been killed by a tiger) add to the intensity of dramatic situations."

Bhattacharyya brooded on the industrial strike of 1939 of the workers of the Digboi Oil Refinery and thirty-one years later wrote his novel *Pratipad*. He says "there is no hero or heroine in the novel; all the characters are prisoners of time." In a way this is true of his entire world of fiction.

Vinayak Krishna Gokak finds that in the three major novels of Bhattacharyya "the world is caught in a moment of crisis and all the pageantry and variety of life are built around that moment."

Of all the editorial work Bhattacharyya did, *Ramdheriu* is cherished fondly by many for its pioneering work in Assamese literature. Many of the accomplished writers of today made their debut in this magazine.

Bhattacharyya began his literary career as a poet and a poet at heart he remains whatever the form he writes in:

I feel guilty, helpless, hurt. . .
The unknown beggar
does not know me,
But I know her.
She is my shame.





With Radhakrishnan, Dinkar and others, 1962

A Select Bibliography

ASSAMESE

Novels

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- CHATURANGA. (consists of four novelettes: *Bharati*, *Eti Nisa*, *Jobo Aru Ida*, and *Paribrajak*) Guwahati: Chandra Prakash, 1987. 225 p. 21.5 cm.
- CINAKI SUTI. Calcutta: Sribhumi Publishing House, 1971. 120 p. 21.5 cm.
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- RAJPATHE RINGAI. Guwahati: Mani Manik Prakash, Second edition, 1982. First edition published by the author, 1955. 128 p. 21.5 cm.

RANGA MEGIL. Calcutta: Sribhumi Publishing House, 1976. 114 p. 21.5 cm.

SARAT KONWAR. Purbanchal Prakashan, 1978. 55 p. 21.5 cm.

SATAGHNI. Guwahati: Chandra Prakash, 1965. 168 p. 21.5 cm.

Short Stories

KOLONG AJO BAL. Guwahati: Lawyers Book Stall, First edition, 1961. Chandra Prakash, 1987. 181 p. 21.5 cm.

SATSARI. Guwahati: Lawyers Book Stall, First edition, 1963. Chandra Prakash, 1987. 126 p. 21.5 cm.

Plays

Out of ten radio plays "Ahalya", a verse drama, was published in the magazine, URULI; another play and a monologue were published in the two-volume anthology, ANTATAR NATYAVALI, Volume II, ed. Arun Sharma: "Bharat" (pp. 58-74), "Kural Kunwar" (pp. 225-234). Guwahati: Assam Publication Board, 1984. 18 cm.





With Ding Ling and Ajneya
in Beijing 1984

ENGLISH

Novels

- IYARUNGAM. Guwahati: Christian Literature Society, 1984. 338 p. 21.5 cm.
MRITYUNIAYA. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1982. 290 p. 21.5 cm.

Biography

- GOPINATH BARDOLOI. New Delhi: Publications Division, Government of India, 109 p. 21.5 cm.

Criticism

- HUMOUR AND SATIRE IN ASSAMESE LITERATURE. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1982. 272 p. 21.5 cm.

TRANSLATIONS OF THE AUTHOR'S WORKS IN OTHER LANGUAGES

- AI. Hindi. Tr. Lokenath Bharali. Hindi Pracharak Pustakalaya, 1963. 154 p. 21.5 cm.
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SATAGNI. Hindi. Tr. Gopal Das. New Delhi: National Publishing House, 1965. 208 p. 21.5 cm.
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With Indra Nath Choudhuri

Biography

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Travelogues

- RUSSIA YATRA. Published in *Prakash*, 1984.
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Other works

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Edited

- KAJMAVIR CHANDRA NATH SARMA. Guwahati: Assam Publication Board, 1981. 252 p. 23.5 cm.

Translations

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DEVA DUNDUBHI BAJE KAR BABA. (Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*). Calcutta: Sribhumi Publishing House, n.d. 614 p. 21.5 cm.
EKURI ETA CHUTI GALPA. (Short-stories of Tagore) New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi. Second edition 1978.
PARINEETA. (Novel of Sarat Chandra Chatterjee) Shillong: Chapala Book Stall, 1948.

A Chronology

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| <p>1924 Birth</p> <p>1941 Matriculation</p> <p>1945 B.Sc.
Asst. Editor,
<i>Banhi</i></p> <p>1947 News Editor,
<i>Dainik Asamiya</i></p> <p>1949 Editor, <i>Janata</i></p> <p>1950 Teacher,
Ukhrul Venture
High School</p> <p>1953 Editor, <i>Ramdhenu</i></p> <p>1956 M.A. Assamese</p> <p>1961 Sahitya Akademi
Award for
<i>Iyaru ingam</i></p> <p>1963 Editor,
<i>Sadiniya Navayug</i></p> <p>1968 Visit to U.S.S.R.</p> <p>1977 Ph. D.</p> <p>1979 Jnanpith Award for
<i>Mrityunjaya</i></p> | <p>1980 Member,
Hindi Saahkar Samiti</p> <p>1982 D. Litt. Honoris Causa,
Jubblepore University;
Member,
National Jury for Prize
for Investigative
Journalism, India.</p> <p>1983 Vice-President,
Sahitya Akademi;
President,
Assam Sahitya Sabha;
Member,
Press Council of India;
Visit to U.S.S.R.</p> <p>1984 Visit to China</p> <p>1986 Chief Editor,
<i>Prakash</i></p> <p>1988 President,
Sahitya Akademi;
Visit to Yugoslavia,
U.S.S.R.</p> |
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With Umashankar Joshi and Sivarama Karanth