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Top Bureaucrat-cum-Artist: An Interview with Indian Writer PCK Prem

Sunil Sharma

PCK Prem is a highly-reputed and versatile trilingual writer with more than 35 published books in Hindi and English. A retired IAS (Indian Administrative Service), settled in Palampur, Himachal Pradesh, India, **Prem Katoch**--- as he is popularly known among his admirers---is regarded as one of the leading voices of the Indian English Poetry. A recipient of many awards, Katoch recently compiled a collection of tales from Mahabharata. In this e-mail interview, the senior novelist, poet, critic and editor discusses with Mumbai-based writer **Sunil Sharma** the contours of the IWE (Indian Writing in English) and allied topics.

What does it mean to be a writer in today's globalised world?

A print word carries a message. To be a writer is a difficult work. It engages him at many levels. Not only socially, he has certain obligations towards society but also as a human being, he ought to be genuine and honest. If one is not truthful and earnest, he cannot be an author. Awareness of global realities gives an opportunity to expand. One is near to the meaning of human kind. True global thoughts and feelings mean secular and universal outlook and it does not recognize barriers of colour, creed or region. It is exclusive. If one understands man in this perspective, one rises, grows and contributes to the spirit of man and humanity. I think, man is evolving slowly and trying to understand man, and it would take time to go beyond and look at existence in totality, as he refuses to reject what materialism offers.

What makes you compose poems, short and long fictions?

I do not work in conditioned settings. An experience of a moment gives it a meaningful definition, for experience defines limits of a creative art. If a moment, a feeling, a thought, or an incident holds tightly, it is enough. The above factors work collectively and I try to give a shape to the thought. It is just natural. If a character appeals, it stirs thoughts, and slowly feelings and reflections concretize. In the beginning, it is merely a figurative expression but gradually, it enlarges and creates a world, very near to you where you wish to live and want others to live. If it is not, then there is something radically wrong intellectually and aesthetically.

How was your experience as a bureaucrat? Did you feel stifled by the atmosphere?

As a bureaucrat, one is engaged in routine work. You have scope to go beyond but you feel restricted. In government, one finds the job's situation chaotic, for interaction with various situations and people confuses but it also offers meaning with a pleasant vainness, and to escape to a world of books always appeared exotic. When you write, you evaluate everything. You dissect men, matters and incidents howsoever big or small. Even if, one is not directly concerned, these do influence and so one has to find a way out of the official

and personal imbroglios. If, one is an author, one ought to know how to reconcile and in the merger of the official and the personal, lies the reality of life and at that time, life gives meaning but also incongruity in purpose. If one knows the meaning of daily work, even if it is without purpose, one's life appears thrilling. Abuse and fierce words at times, offer meaning. If one works honestly, satisfaction fills. One works under suffocating limitations at work where various social and political factors function as self-interests of people in power distort visions and social philosophy of a welfare state. If one manages to get rid of such conditioned and regimented situations even for a few moments, it is enough to grant peace, peace that disturbs and it leads one to creativity. It is for an individual to get out of the droning *babu's* mind set, for it would also protect him from many physical and psychological ailments and disorders.

Self-interest is not conducive to anyone and that makes a system sick, for self-promoting thoughts/acts drive men to unethical and corrupt practices, and therefore, corruption and immorality takes roots. For people, who have nothing worthwhile to do, what next is the question. I call it an amusing vainness or futility. A thought occurs and it should provoke everyone to assess what he does for the society. Everyone is attached to people and work. One should not forget that one gets money for the work one does whatever may be the status in life –whether one is a peon or a ruler. Public pays you and so you must be faithful to people and if you are not, you create a chaotic and violent society. Here, many questions arise many would not like to listen. It is absolute hypocrisy if you call it public service. I work because I get money, it is with everyone, and people pay for the service you render (Honest services?), one should know. If a man says that he serves people, it is huge myth and an act of deception. Exceptions are few.

If one organizes and manages time, gives space and time to every function without much scope for gossips and politicking, it gives pleasure and then nothing can stifle or suffocate.

How did you manage to find time, while serving as bureaucrat/commissioner, for literary pursuits?

I did not find it difficult. You have sufficient time to do various jobs you are assigned provided you do not indulge in gossips and political exchange of ideas. When a big *babu/babu* (clerk) or for that matter any servant (whether in government or private concern) irrespective of the status/hierarchy in society wants to promote career's prospects and so is engaged in prejudiced maneuvering, it is politics of self-interest. Such manipulations consume time and energy, and kill identity, for one deceitful act leads to another. Honest and righteous conduct never disturbs but it promotes goodwill, happiness and relations and you have time for everything.

How are your writings in Hindi and *Dogri* or *Pahari* different from English ones?

Pahari in Himachal is a dialect and for the last four decades, many authors are writing poems, *gazals*, short stories, folktales, and novella. I find an ardent

ardor among the regional writers, who also write in Hindi. Creative writings in *Pahari* mostly concentrate on traditions, culture, rituals and customs of people and it appears the authors are sincere in guarding cultural roots. I enjoy writing in *Pahari* dialect whenever I feel. In tone, tenor and sensibility, it is different. Human emotions are similar with a shade distinct but beneath the feel, the warmth and the depth remain genuine.

What made you turn recently to Indian mythology?

I struggled with the idea for the last many years. I read and reread many a time and wanted to feel the myths and the legends within but could not get time to actualize the project. The young generation remains super glued to the idiot box and wants to gather as much information as it can but stays nowhere. It is knowledge but no wisdom. Impatience and unsteadiness disturbs vision of life other than materialistic. I realized, perhaps, perhaps, I could make an attempt. Therefore, I translated nay rewrote down those tales from *Mahabharata*, which many have not read. Tales convey in simple language the message of truth, righteousness and *dharma*, and tell clearly that religion of man does not belong to one community or country but real *dharma* –religion or idea of noble life, belongs to the entire humankind. Its inclusivity is secular and universal and this thought inspired me to rewrite (not precisely a translation) it for all in a simple language that goes with contemporary realities.

The reasons for editing a collection of tales from the ageless epic *Mahabharata*?

An author writes to convey a thought, an intellectual interpretation of life or tries to teach the art of practical life and defines life in totality suiting his cerebral capacity. I feel he tells about the multifaceted life and analyzes its multi-layered puzzles. When I read ancient tales, I found eternal stories convey truths and facts in wholesome compactness and leave nothing. Here, one finds essence of life. Tales define *karma* (acts), *dharma* (righteousness and truth) and sufferings that have origin in virtues of life –*Sattva* or truth or ethics, *Rajas* or dynamism or opulence or adventure and *Tamas* or passion or indulgence or lethargy while trying to understand the substance of miseries and sacrifice –*Yajna*.

Who are the most exciting voices in Indian Writing in English?

It would be inappropriate to assess contribution of writers writing in English, for many are still living, and contributing to different literary genres. Still, I like writings of Mulk Raj Anand, K. R Narayan, Raja Rao, Anita Desai and Naipaul to name a few.

Can we, as bilingual writers with a colonial heritage, capture the same intensity and vibrancy in Indian English that we find in the daily lingo of the streets, in the idiom and syntax of regional languages?

Many authors have tried, and appeared quite authentic. I think it will take time to assimilate finer sensibilities and nuances of a language other than a mother

tongue but still freshness encourages many to experiment and make innovative efforts to fine-tune an alien lingo. Already, English is making inroads into the lingua franca of people everywhere and carries no offense but speaks of the awareness and attitude of candidness and enthusiastic expression. Here, I must put a stipulation. English is not an exclusive home of anyone as it has worldwide recognition.

What are the causes for the sudden romancing of English by the middle-class Indian writers in the Age of the FB and Twitter?

An itch to explore new horizons of ingenious terminology in the age of rapid growth of social media with new landmark inventions that assist exposure to different regions of men, matters and ideas bringing restlessness that provokes to attempt newness in life. It is a determined wish to get gratitude and notice outside the usual area of work and operation.

Your favourite themes and recurring literary themes in your varied trilingual writings so far?

Mother tongue inspires to adhere to matters, feelings and thoughts that take to roots, to the soil from where a man takes birth. One cannot disconnect from the land of birth. Here, everything that smells of earth fascinates a man. Man is the major theme of my creative writings. Man's worldly anxieties and the spirit to live realistically with emphasis on goodness in human nature remain my areas of worries and treatment. If a man lives like a man without negative thoughts and inhuman tendencies, he lives a true life. Love, relations, truth and goodness encourage me too often to define these qualities in changed circumstances and locations in life.

How do you evaluate Indian Writing in English within the larger socio-cultural context of Indian Literatures?

Changes in science, technology and medicine effect society and consequently, lifestyles undergo a change. We have travelled a long distance from the days of Anand to Naipaul and Shobha De. A perceptive author in every period of history or even in a tiny slice of time tries to depict the psychological and physiological regions of mind keeping in view fast transformation that takes place outside. One witnesses terrific changes in social behaviour, political life and economic life of people. Human relationship undergoes drastic changes as individual aspirations overwhelm. If one witnesses breakdown in human relationship, it is attributable to a fast growing yet tacit penchant to live life with least restraint and therefore, value system and relations appear unsteady. An awakened woman asserts, and until women occupy right place of equality...in the social set up, the changes would continue to upset, stabilize and then develop a more congenial environment for man-woman to live. Authors everywhere have mostly tried to judge human relationship keeping in view the social and economic conditions of society while evaluating the impact of swift changes in political thought.

Your experience as an editor and reviewer?

Many critical theories exist and new take birth. Each protagonist of a theory tries to evaluate a creative work as per the principles of analysis laid down. It is not the intention to talk of various theories. In truth, the functions of a critic are complex and difficult. Creative minds are usually inscrutable, challenging it would appear, and when an artist creates something multilayered and many-sided, then emotional, intellectual and societal influences determine his position in the total landscape of life. To do justice to the creative power of an artist/author is a challenge to the wisdom and knowledge of a critic. So, he has to be cautious and objective and at the same time he ought to keep critical faculties active in his arsenal where he has workable if not comprehensive knowledge of history, culture and varied impacts working on the mind and intellect of man and society. It is difficult to be a critic but still efforts should continue and to this extent, I experience newness in feelings and thoughts whenever I take up an author to find out what he says and how.

Any piece of advice to writers still struggling hard?

Walk ahead and keep a watchful eye. Hear every word and sound, listen to what a man says, experience each moment, and try to translate experience of an even a moment or incident into a language you know, co-relate and rearrange in view of a fresh experience and then brush up what you write and experience, and judge its authenticity. Yes, it requires an emotional and intellectual engagement of years of stitching, hawing and prevarication before a writer can stand up and face the hard or pleasant truth of what it is to be an author.

Thanks

Thank you very much, Dr Sunil Sharma.