

***REMEMBERING O.P. BHATNAGAR (AN HUMBLE TRIBUTE)***

***A Thinker Among Poets***

**By Prof. V.G. Nand**

My acquaintance with O.P. Bhatnagar, known as O.P. in his intimate circle, dates back to the winter of 1969 in Hyderabad where I had gone to do the Post-Graduate Diploma in Teaching English at the Central Institute of English which a couple years later came to be renamed as Central Institute of English and Foreign languages. In those days the college teachers had to attend U.G.C. sponsored Summer Institutes of Six Weeks in the summer vacation. The C.I.E. decided that the candidates who were declared outstanding at two of such Summer Institutes would be allowed to do the full Nine-Months' diploma by attending the second term only. Of course, they had to study the full course, i.e. do the entire syllabus and undergo rigorous training. I was among the outstanding participants of two Summer Institutes, of the Summers of 1968 and 1969 organized by University of Pune and I earned the U.G.C. fellowship also. There were some others like me coming from other universities in the country. Ours was a strong group of ten. O.P. was in our group. Soon four or five of us became friends and I became closer to O.P.

He was tall, thin. Of light complexion, had thin hair, kept moustache and walked straight. Wore simple clothes. Soft-spoken, clear of speech he was firm in his opinion whenever he expressed it but was never harsh in arguing though he made his point precisely. A gentleman to the core I would say. Yes, a true gentleman. Not a pusher, a quality strongly needed in the current times of consumerism and marketing. People like O.P. are sometimes neglected and no wonder he came to be neglected in some parts of the literary world. Not that he bothered about such things and even when he was criticized vehemently, he did not lose his poise and adopted rationalizing attitude. Being of the same category by nature he told me what I should do and how I should approach if I wanted to do something in his field, i.e. writing.

That was a good winter for me. So many memories come rushing to my mind. Often after the day's hard work we used to go out for walk in the darkening skies. Sometimes for coffee at a coffee shop about a furlong from our hostel. He enjoyed his cup of coffee and if we went to a restaurant, he was never fussy about any dishes that were ordered. In fact, he did not like being fussy and once in a restaurant when a colleague who was with us became over-critical of some dish we had ordered as being too hot and a sweet dish being too sweet he was visibly flustered and when we came out and this colleague was out of hearing distance he said "such people should be flogged in public-square". That was the only time I saw him losing his cool during our stay at C.I.E. In general, he remained quite calm and in control of his temper never using any abusive epithets for anybody. He enjoyed the activity he was involved in. Whether studies, reading or eating. Once three or four of us had cut a tutorial class and gone wandering in the sun to the nearby post-office for posting letters and things like that. That done as we moved further, a little ahead of the post-office we saw a cart-vendor selling guavas. O.P. was delighted and entertained us with the rich, tasty sweet guavas. On another occasion he treated us to a cheese-party. Someone had gifted him a tin of cheese and one afternoon he called us, the usual group, and delighted us with the cheese which we ate heartily. He liked tea more than coffee and as tea was and is my weakness, I always instantly responded whenever he suggested that we go for tea. That was a common bond between us. We had also gone to see a war-movie on a Saturday afternoon in February, perhaps March. It begins to get quite hot by March in Hyderabad. But even in the sweltering heat we were eager to have tea first before getting into the cinema-hall.

By now the course was nearing its end. And 30<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> March saw all of us return home. Addresses were collected. Friendly pleasantries were exchanged with a promise to meet again but few thereafter bothered to remain in touch. O.P., however, kept the contact alive by quickly responding to my letters. Our exchanges of letters became more frequent.

While I was still at Mahad O.P. had been transferred to the State Institute of English Mumbai where he had a two year stint with some sort language exercises that were a part of the work done there. I met him there twice or thrice. On one occasion we saw Madhukar Toradmal's

play “Bhowra”. Prof. Toradmal had played the main role. Bhatnagar enjoyed the political satire.

When I left Mahad in 1972 and joined Thane College and was hoping to meet O.P. more frequently, he had gone back to Amaravati and our contact was restricted to letter-writing thereafter.

While we corresponded regularly sometimes there used to be silences for long. Then gradually the other side of O.P.B. began to be unfolded. He liked to travel and once advised me to move out as much as possible. He had always been on the move. Attending conferences, visiting for other purposes and so on. By eighties he had done a lot of travelling. In one of the letters he wrote that his endeavours in poetry had taken him across the globe to U.K., U.S.A., Japan and some other places and then I came to know he was already an established poet. I met him thrice between 1980 and 1990. Once in Mumbai in 1986 when he had come to attend a marriage ceremony in South Bombay. I spent nearly two hours with him. He was staying somewhere near Hotel President. He came out with me and we had a long stroll along the back waters. He had liked the idea of my poem ‘System Rules’ and asked to pursue my efforts seriously. That very year I had gone to Nagpur in December. He was in Nagpur attending All India English Teachers’ Conference. He attended these conferences very regularly.

I showed him my poem on ‘System’ and he liked it and wished me luck and of course gave me some useful advice also. The third time was when again he had come to Mumbai in connection with another marriage ceremony and this time I was lucky that he accepted my invitation and came down to Dombivili and stayed overnight. He had come with his wife and she conducted herself so gracefully! He praised my small household and said I had kept it ‘spick-and-span’. I had spoken to Dr. Wadikar, Head-Dept. Of English R.K.T. College, Ulhasnagar about him and he had insisted that I bring him to his college. He had arranged for a talk by O.P.B. to students of M.A. English Literature. O.P.B. delivered a nice talk on English language. I forgot, I had met him once more in the Summer of 1988 when I had gone to Nagpur with my family. I went to meet him in Amaravati. I spent an afternoon with him.

He played the good host and was gracious enough to reach me to the bus-stand and see me off. O.P. gave me a pack of books – all the volumes of poetry he had written till then.

By eighties he was a well-established author of Indo-English Literature. He had gained name as a poet and critic. He had six collections of poetry : THOUGHT POEMS, FEELING FOSSILS, ANGLES OF RETREAT, ONEIRIC VISIONS, AUDIBLE LANDSCAPE AND SHADOWS IN FLOOD LIGHT. He had edited several volumes of poetry and criticism. He had earned several honours in poetry within the country and abroad. He had participated in the IV World Congress Of Poets held in Seoul, Korea in 1979, VI World Congress of Poets held in San Francisco, U.S.A. in 1981, the Chikyu Poetry Festival, Tokyo in 1984 and also delivered the keynote address at the First Asian Poets Conference, Tokyo, Japan in 1984. For his services to poetry he was honoured with Doctorate by the University of New York.

O.P. Bhatnagar was a sensitive soul and his poetry exhibits rare intensity, vitality and seriousness in combining aesthetics with the socio-political existence of man in the country.

Simplicity was the outstanding characteristic of this man who had trotted the globe with his achievement in the field of poetry. He advocated simplicity in poetry, too. In his letter of 6<sup>th</sup> June 1989 written to Dr. AtmaRam he says:

“A good poem, in my opinion, is simple and devoted to human concern. Simplicity above all. A good poem must develop instincts for rich simplicity. Simplicity in precise imagery. It is an artistic attitude towards life. Simplicity crystallizes poetic thought and establishes harmony of form and content. A good poem must be a dialogue between man and man and win man by both its content and style. A good poem is always written in a conversational style”.

Bhatnagar himself was a good conversationalist. The charm of his conversation lay in his witty and clever utterances and analysis. He never flung any insulting remarks at anybody. Once during the course of casual conversation I complained to him about a certain learned professor whose attitude towards students was almost ruthless and who had no hesitation in making rude comments that could have a demoralising effect. Bhatnagar knew the person and

only said, “some people are able to push on with the force of their personality”. For him wisdom lay in understanding and analysing; be it a situation or a person, rather than flinging caustic remarks. He shows the same attitude in his poetry also. Dr. R.K. Singh in his article, ‘AVERAGE IS LARGE’ on O.P. Bhatnagar’s poetry says, “As a poet of constructive wisdom he claims to stand for the ‘average in life’, the ordinary man whose identity is lost in the crowd of ‘extra-ordinary’. He sees life as ‘a large humanity’ Averaged between the extra / And the ordinary” (Average is Large).

As a poet he belongs to the category of the intellectual. He was a thinker among poets.

Above all he was a champion of Indian writing in English, particularly poetry. In his article TURNING NEW LEAVES : Some New Voices in Indian Poetry in English published in Vol. X 1989 of The Rajasthan Journal of English Studies – The Special Number on Indian poetry in English he says :

“However local, the texture of their poetry is fresh and living. There is no complex of suffering the British notion of accuracy. Phrase marking or syntax, thereby escaping affectation as well as the superciliousness of Raj attitude in poetry. xxxx The immediacy to say makes their poetry more talkative than meditative. xxxx May be it speaks of the restiveness of their feelings. May be the changing contexts need a vocality of this kind. But while authenticity remains the aesthetics suffers. May be their creative years and devotion ahead may develop the necessary aesthetic distancing between feeling and form and response and expression in the wake of their native modes of perception. India is no more a foil to them for their image building but a home ground for re-arranging relationships between history, culture and art. That is why the presence of a very large chunk of religious and devotional poetry in English in India today bespeaks of the assertion of this basic Indian ethos to life in English. According to the British norms this may be condemned as non-literary but in India “Saint Vangmaya” (or Saint Literature) is a reality on its own. And if English has to gather a native Indian hue then it must pass through all types of creative uses and channels of this kind. Therefore, the more new voices the better”.

His literary and critical writings apart, this view of O.P. Bhatnagar marks him as the determined voice championing the cause of poetry written by Indian poets in English. That to my mind is the greatest service rendered by him to Indo-English poetry and writing. That no Indian can write poetry in English was the sort of opinion prevalent in the academic world upto Seventies of the last century. O.P. Bhatnagar's view quoted above has strongly rebutted the academician's haughty opinion about Indo-English poetry.

**Bio:**

Prof. V.G. Nand, M.A. (Eng.) P.G.D.T.E. (CIE) Hyderabad

☎ 08652857704

Prof. V.G. Nand is a retired Principal and Professor of English having taught English language and literature at graduate and post-graduate levels. He has taught Communication skills and public speaking to college students as also to professionals doing C.A. course. He had conducted Public Speaking and Effective Communication Course for Fifteen Summers for the Rotaract [Main] Club of Dombivli in recognition of which he was awarded Late Appa Datar Trophy for Best Social Worker of the town in 2001. He is a poet and translator with two publications to his credit namely TRIVIDHA in 2007 – a collection of poems in three languages, Marathi, Hindi, English and DHOOP KA SAAYA in 2012 – a collection of poems in Hindi. He has done a dozen of translations, seven of which have been published. 'Relationships' by N.F. Jain (English into English); some poems of Late Prof. and poet Keshav Meshram's poems from Marathi into English appearing in Indian Literature Vol. XXIII No. 1 and 2 in 1980; two of his poems appeared in, 'Poisoned Bread' and 'No Entry for the New Sun' published by Orient Longmans in 1992 and Disha Publications in 1992 respectively, both edited by Arjun Dangle; 'Toba Teksinh' – Saadat Hassan Munto's story from Hindi into Marathi for Tarun Bharat in 2005; SONBA a short novel by Ramakant Jadhav, from Marathi into English published by Aai Publications Dombivli, in 2000 and by Hope India Delhi, in 2006; 'SONJATAK' by Ratanlal Sanagra from Marathi into English published by Signet Publications in 2002 and Padma Binani's A To Z Mahabharat from Hindi into English published by Binani Foundations in 2012.