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meet the author

Pratibha Ray



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A young Pratibha Ray

"One day my daughter will become a doctor as well as a poet like Utkal Bharati and Kuntala Kumari Sabat". This was the fond dream of Late Parasuram Das, Pratibha Ray's father, himself a poet and a follower of Gandhiji. He had quit a comfortable job at the Tata Iron & Steel Co. in 1942 and returned to his native village Alabol in the Cuttack district of Odisha to join as the first Headmaster of Balikuda High School in Balikuda, just three kilometres away from his village Alabol. But the sensitive young girl Pratibha secretly nurtured a dream to become a writer one day and not a doctor. She left Medical College just after taking admission there to follow her dreams of becoming a writer and joined Ravenshaw College, Cuttack.

Pratibha Ray was born on 21 January, 1943 in her headmaster father's official quarters in Balikuda. She completed her

schooling from there. Her father had always been her beloved teacher, friend, philosopher and guide.

Pratibha married right after graduation to Akshaya Chandra Ray, who was from an orthodox joint family. But the achiever in her was not lost amidst the hearth-centric life and early motherhood. Everyday, after sending her three children to school, she sat down to study and completed her Master's in Education and then Ph.D. in Educational Psychology.

She started her career as the Headmistress in a tribal girls school and later taught in the Ravenshaw College and various other government colleges in Odisha for 29 years. She took voluntary retirement from State Government service in 1998 after being nominated to Odisha Public Service Commission as a Member.

Today Pratibha Ray is one of the foremost fiction writers of India. She has been writing novels and short stories since the last four decades in her mother tongue Odia, a language with an ancient literary heritage and which was accorded a classical status by Government of India in 2013.



With her family



Receiving Moorti Devi Award

Pratibha Ray has always attributed the boldness, revolt, compassion and humanism in her works to the profound influence of her Gandhian father who always protested against injustice and oppression. The search for a "social order based on equality, love, peace, non-violence and national emotional integration" is evident in her writings too, since she first wielded her pen at the tender age of nine.

Since her early youth, Pratibha Ray's poems, stories and features were regularly being published in important periodicals and newspapers of Odissa, but she caught the attention of the readers only after her first novel *Barsha-Basanta-Baishakha* (Rain, Spring and Summer) was published in 1974. Here was a deviation from a narrative tradition of storytelling. Her perceptive account of the human seasons through men and women who are in her opinion not playthings of fate and fatalism, touched the heart's of the readers immediately.

Later, even as she branched out to explore more hidden recesses of the mind, she continued to use the same colloquial style with an eye for

the odd detail that is the hallmark of her writing. Pratibha also grapples with issues of contemporary relevance, oppressive surroundings, overpowering tension of modern life, corruption and degeneration of values in every sphere.

Pratibha Ray has always been powerfully drawn to history and legends and often builds intricate narratives around themes that are part of the racial consciousness of Odissa. The narrative technique used in her novel *Shilapadmay* is a dramatic juxtaposition of history, symbolism and logic.

Uttarmarg (1988) is Pratibha Ray's tribute to the freedom fighters of Balikuda and Alabol. It is history fictionalised where names and events have been symbolised to suggest the trauma and triumph of lesser known patriots who sacrificed their lives for the freedom of the country, though completely neglected by historians.

Pratibha Ray reconstructs the life of Draupadi in her novel *Jajnaseni* (1984). The novel epitomises Mahabharata's enigmatic heroine Draupadi as a modern day woman with an identity of her own. The novel has received pan-Indian

appreciation and has been translated into all major Indian languages and also into English and Hungarian. It went on to fetch her the prestigious Moorti Devi Award in 1991.

Pratibha Ray's classic novel *Mahamoha* (The Great Lust) is again a bold and innovative statement on modern femininity. The Ahalya myth has been taken up in this epic novel, highlighting a transformative dimension to this myth, celebrating the free soul of Pratibha's concept of the new woman.

Her anthropological research on the lifestyle and behaviour patterns of Bondo highlanders took her to the remote hills of the Koraput district of Odisha at a time when people were apprehensive of facing the savage tribals. Pratibha travelled to all thirty-two villages of that area, tucked away in the remote folds of the inaccessible hills of south Odisha. This research resulted in another masterpiece *Aadibhoomi* (Primal Land, 1993).

However, according to critics like Prof. Prafulla Kumar Mohanty and Prof. Nityananda Satapathy, Pratibha Ray's greatest novel is *Magnamati* (After the Deluge, 2004), based on the devastating super cyclone

which hit the eastern coast of India in 1999. The novel depicts the devastating cyclone and its transformative effect on those affected by it.

In personal life too she has active interest in social reform. For instance, she fought and led a campaign against the powerful priestly orthodoxy of the Jagannath Temple at Puri for which she had to fight a defamation case against her by the high priests of the temple.

Pratibha Ray's reputation does not stem from her novels alone. She is a prolific short story writer too. Till date she has published 26 short story collections. *Ullanghan*, her Sahitya Akademi Award winning collection of short stories, is noted for its deft handling of human frailties with a compassion and a unique world view.

Pratibha Ray has travelled all over the world and has published ten travelogues about the countries she has visited with an eye for cultural and social realities. According to eminent critic Prafulla Mohanty, "Pratibha is a complete writer. She has written stories for children, reading materials for neo-literates, essays, poems,



Receiving Padmashree from President Dr A.P.J. Abdul Kalam in 2007



Receiving Jnanpith Award in 2011 from President Pranab Mukherjee

lyrics, drama and has also translated. Her characters are identifiably real and the use of sensuous and symbolic metaphors makes her men and women palpable and perfectly humans despite their angularities and naivete. Philosophy and inspired vision do not mar her works into the priestly texts of moral preaching. Her language is a poetic blend of the sublime and the colloquial which she uses in situation-specific contexts. Many of her works have been performed on stage : for instance her epic novel *Jajnaseni* was choreographed and staged by renowned actress and danseuse Hema Malini as a stage ballet. Her works were also performed at the Konarak Festival several times. Many of her novels have been made into films, telefilms and serials.

A Chronology

- 1943 : Born in Balikuda near her village Alabol in undivided Cuttack District of Odisha.
- 1955 : First poem published.
- 1961 : First story "Chabi" (the key) published.
- 1967 : Marriage
- 1974 : Established Adyaprakashani, her own publishing house to publish exclusively her books and later her daughter's books.
- 1974 : First novel *Barsha Basanta Baishakha* published.
- 1978 : First story collection *Samanya Kathan* published.
- 1982 : Ph.D. Degree in Educational Psychology.
- 1985 : Odisha Sahitya Akademi Award.
- 1990 : Received Sarala Award.
- 1991 : Received Moorti Devi Award.
- 1994 : Invited to read out her stories in Nehru Centre, London.
- 1994 : Katha Prize
- 1995 : Outstanding Odia literary award from Odisha Society of Americas, USA.
- 1999 : Katha Prize
- 2000 : Received Sahitya Akademi Award.
- 2000 : Conferred with Katha Bharati Title.
- 2004 : Established Bhashayana, a literary organisation, to build bridges between Odia, India and World literature
- 2006 : Received Amrita Keerti Award, Kerala for contribution to Indian Literature.
- 2007 : Conferred with Padmashree.
- 2011 : Received Jnanpith Award.
- 2011 : D.Litt. Honoris causa from Utkal University of Culture.
- 2014 : D.Litt. Honoris causa from Ravenshaw University.
- 2013 : Received Odisha Living Legend Award
- 2014 : Conferred with Kalinga Ratna Award

A Select Bibliography

Oriya

Novels

Barsa Basant Baishakha (Rain, Spring, Summer), 1974

Shilapadma (Konark - Citadel of Love), 1983

Yajnaseni (Draupadi) (Rupa & Co.), 1985

Uitarmarg (The Road After), 1988

Aadibhoomi (Primal Land) (Orient Black Swan), 1993

Mahamoh (The Great Lust), 1997

Magnamati (After the Deluge), 2003

Maharaniputra (Son of a Queen), 2008

Sesha Iswar (The Last God), 2015

Short Stories

Samanya Kathan (Synopsis), 1978

Hatabaksa (Traditional Hand Box), 1983

Bhagaban ra Desh (The Land of God), 1991

Sasthasati (Sixth Sati), 1996

Moksh (Salvation) (East-West Publication), 1996

Ullanghan (Transgression), 1998

Nivedanamidam (An Appeal), 2000

Gandhinka Gaon (Village of Gandhiji), 2003

Poetry

Chiradina do do Chinnha, 2013

Lyrics

Aajana Aei Nai (Unknown River), 2010

Essay Collections

Sanskrutira Navipadma (Core of the Culture), 2011

Padasanaya Namah (Greetings on the Lotus feet), 2011

Sahrudaya Katha Bhasha (Intimate Sharing), 2015

Retelling Tribal Myth

Kathatia kahun Kathani (Telling the Tale), 2014

Translations

Manusaya Chinha (Translation from Hindi to Odia)

Play

Srusti (Creation), 2014

Children's Stories

Pahada upare Ghara (A house on the hill), 2010

Travelogue

Maitripadapara Shakha Prasakha (Branches of Friendship Tree) (USSR), 1990

Aparadhira Sweda (The Sweat of the Criminals) (Australia), 2000

Meru Abhisara (The Northern Light) (Norway), 2003

Tushara Marura Maya (Illusion of Snow Desert), Sweden, 2003

New York ru Nagasaki (From New York to Nagasaki) (America), 2003

Afrika Naika Nilanadi (Heroine River Nile), 2007

Swapna ra Alaska (Alaska, My Dream), 2015

Autobiography

Padma Patra re Jiban (Life on Lotus Leaf), 2015

English

Original works in English :

Kuntala Kumari Sabat (Biography) by Sahitya Akademi, 1994

Crystal Opaque (Essay Collection) by Bhashayana, 2015

Intimate Dialogue, Bhashayana, 2015

English Translation of own works

Jajnaseni (Rupa & Co.), 1995

Salvation & Other Stories, Affiliated East West Press, 2000

The Primal Land (Aadibhoomi) Orient Longman, (now Orient Black Swan), 2000

After the Deluge (Magnamati), Amazon.com

Citadel of Love (Shilapadma), Rupa & Co., 2015

Dream Time Stories (Pakshi Ghar), Bhubaneswar, 2015

The Great Lust (Amazon.com), 2015



With Peace Nobel Laureate Regabeta Mencho, 1999