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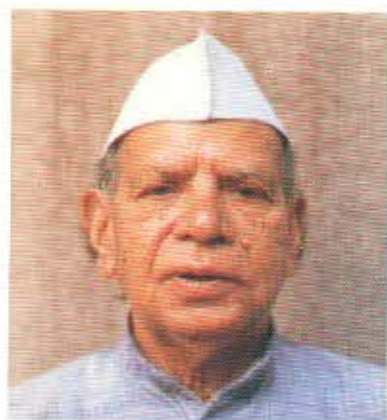
India International Centre

invite you to

meet the author

Vishnu Prabhakar





“For a writer, no one is an outsider,” responded Vishnu Prabhakar when the historian R.C. Majumdar asked him why he, a non-Bengali, should go through such painstaking effort to write a biography of Sarat Chandra.

Such is the assimilative capacity of this man whose life and writings reflect invariably an empathy with the other—most often, the marginalised and the voiceless of society. He is fascinated by the less-trodden path, the neglected landscape, whether these are of the mind, of society or the actual, physical, earth. His passion for

travel—be it trekking up Gomukh, paddling a boat on River Irawaddy, or taking a slow train to Trivandrum—is a direct manifestation of his love of exploration and his joy in variety; an indirect manifestation of this passion is reflected in his choice of hobbies—philately, numismatics and penfriendships.

Born in Mirapur in 1912, and brought up in Hissar, Vishnu Prabhakar was deeply influenced by his mother, the first educated woman in the family, who had brought a box of books as part of her dowry. One of his earliest recollections is of playing not with toys, but with books.

As a stripling of seventeen, he took up employment at the Government Cattle Farm in Hissar where he was to work for the next fifteen years. At twenty-six, he married Sushila Devi who was to have a life-long influence over him—guiding him when directions were unclear, sharing his triumphs and disappointments. His nationalistic activities led to his arrest



With Amitav Ghosh and Shivarama Karanth



With the former President Giani Zail Singh, 1987

twice, in 1940 and in 1942 and he had to leave Punjab.

While in service he educated himself further, privately, and immersed himself in books, reading voraciously of the Holy Quran and the Bible, and the works of Tolstoy, Gorky, Dickens, Hardy, Shaw, O'Neil, O'Henry, Gandhi, Premchand, Bankim Chandra, Sarat Chandra and Tagore.

The magic worlds thrown open by his reading, and the consequent re-interpretation of his own experiences, influenced Vishnu Prabhakar in two ways. First, he became increasingly dissatisfied with the routine nature of his job and fortunately was asked to resign by the Punjab Government. He came to Delhi and eventually took to free-lancing after brief spells at the Akhil Bhartiya Ayurveda Mahamandal and the All India Radio. And, second, his increasing sensitization to the fragility and sadness of the human condition led him into an intense, but short-lived,

acceptance of institutionalised religion. Through the ups and downs of this journey of self-realization, his two constant companions were his understanding wife and his love for literature.

His first short story, 'Diwali Ke Din', written under the nom de plume, 'Prem Bandhu' was published in 1931 by *Hindi Milap* (Lahore). He now has over seventy books of plays, short stories, biographies, novels, travelogues and character-sketches. In this vast literary firmament, it would be difficult indeed to pick out any one work that best represents Vishnu Prabhakar; if, however, such a choice had to be made, then the credit would undoubtedly go to *Awara Massih*, his biography of Sarat Chandra Chatterjee.

Awara Massih was the outcome of fourteen years of tireless research involving journeys in Bengal, Bihar and Burma and interviews with a large number of Sarat's contemporaries. Vishnu Prabhakar even learnt Bengali

specifically in order to understand his subject better. The book is widely regarded as a landmark in biographical writing in Hindi, not only because of its authenticity and rich detail but also because the biographer uses facts in the same way that a sailor uses his compass—as a means of arriving at the more important reality to which the needle points. The subtle textures of Sarat's thoughts and feelings are brought vividly alive.

This delicacy of perception is a characteristic feature of Vishnu Prabhakar's writing; and, it becomes a powerful mode of social comment when it is used, for instance, to explore the behaviour of a child interpreting the corrupt world through innocent eyes, or represent the mind of a woman wrongly accused of infidelity.

Vishnu Prabhakar's place in the world of Hindi letters is unchallenged; the honours, national and international that he has received are many—the most recent being the presti-



With grandchildren

gious Murti Devi Award and the Shalaka Award. His commitment to literature has taken the form of very active participation in many literary bodies throughout the country. He is also a member of the Executive Board of the Sahitya Akademi.

Yet such is his modesty, that he has always said that if a choice had to be made, he would much prefer to be regarded as a good person than as a good writer. His place as a writer is so assured, however, that this choice, fortunately, need never be made.

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A Chronology

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|-------|---|------|---|
| 1912 | Birth | 1951 | <i>Nav Prabhat</i> (Play) |
| 1929 | Matric; joined Government Cattle Farm, Hissar | 1955 | Joined AIR |
| 1931 | 'Diwali Ke Din', first short story; founded the Rama Dramatic Club | 1957 | Resigned from AIR and resumed free-lance writing |
| 1938 | Marriage with Sushila Devi | 1960 | Visit to Burma |
| 1940& | Arrested for alleged | 1962 | Visit to USSR; first travelogue <i>Jamuna Ganga Ke Naiher Mein</i> |
| 1942 | nationalistic activities | 1974 | <i>Awara Massih</i> |
| 1944 | Resigned from job joined Ayurveda Mahamandal; Member, National Congress Party | 1975 | Received International Humanist Award |
| 1945 | <i>Adi Aur Ant</i> , first short story collection | 1976 | Second visit to USSR; Soviet Land Nehru Award for <i>Awara Massih</i> |
| 1946 | Resigned from job; began free-lance writing | 1980 | Received Rashtriya Ekta Award; Sushila Devi passes away |
| 1947 | Went to Kashmir as journalist writer | 1987 | Uttar Pradesh Hindi Sansthan Samman |
| 1950 | Left the National Congress Party | 1990 | Murti Devi Award for <i>Satta Ke Aar Paar</i> , Shalaka Samman |



With Nayantara Sahgal, Shiv K. Kumar, Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai and Ajeet Cour