

Vishwanath Prasad Tiwari

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Vishwanath Prasad Tiwari (born 1940) is the voice of the village he was born in, the voice of the times he was born in, and the voice that knows to draw the anguish of the soul. A well-known Hindi critic, essayist and poet, he has been diligently working on himself by way of working on the language, literature and the subtleties of thought.

Born seven years before the independence of India from the British Imperial rule in a small hamlet a few kilometres away from the India-Nepal border, in Gorakhpur district of the the north Indian state Uttar Pradesh, Tiwari has never swerved from his roots. He has, in fact, strengthened them, made them visible and kept them alive, contrary to the natural order, in his writings. Presently he is serving as the president of Sahitya Akademi, the highest and the most prestigious national academy of letters in India, established in 1954, which has published around 6000 books till date, roughly one book per 19 hours in 24 Indian languages besides organizing a variety of workshops, seminars, conferences and talks on Indian literature and bestowing the most consecrated national literary awards each year. Tiwari continues to uphold the rich and diverse tradition of the academy, by being himself.

When I met him for first time he was clad in *kurta*, a traditional Indian long shirt, which he always wears along with a *dhoti*, the long loincloth, or with a *pyjama*, a pair of loose traditional trousers tied by a drawstring around the waist. He also had *aalta* on his feet, an orange coloured dye used for decorating the contours of feet, which immediately caught my attention. I wanted to ask him why he had *aalta* on his feet but it seemed too much for the first meeting. Some days later the topic came up and he told me that it was for a religious occasion that he had to put on the dye on his feet being the head of the family. In the sprawling, mega-urbanised and chaotic cities of contemporary India, you almost never see a person with *aalta* on his feet: it seems anomalous and yet at the same time, organic.

In his autobiography, *Asti aur Bhavti* (to be and to become), published in 2014, which almost reads like a novel, Tiwari engages the reader with truths, turmoils, philosophies, certitudes and discrepancies in the life he inhabits. His memories follow a progression, as it should be in the genre of autobiography, but regardless of that, his analytic and critical knife is set in motion from the beginning, and in an immortal kind of way it defies the progression of the autobiography. His voice is looking at his life from above, below, and laterally too. His voice is also meshed with the epoch, the times he has lived in.

The majority of India still lives in rural areas, and demographically speaking rural India is not at all at par with the urban India. It is usually defined by epithets like backward, underdeveloped, traditional and orthodox. Tiwari's writings, his poetry, essays and other texts reflect an insider's narrative on rural India, as it is. It's neither glorified nor used to breach further an urban/rural divide. Tiwari rather tends to introspect the interior for every question and every doubt he has: for

instance he contemplates deeply on the confusions and tribulations he suffers while growing up regarding his choice of career when he was young and also when he first comes to the capital of India, Delhi, and gets intimidated while crossing the streets full of traffic.

Apart from glimpses into the inner working of mind and heart, what one can also read in Tiwari's autobiography and all the other texts is a historical view of the times he has lived, the political, literary and social aspects of the India he grew up in. His voice is also anecdotal, which summarises his journey passing through various milestones, big or small, and moments that have defined his own quest to be something or to just be where he stands today.

The reader of his poetry also experiences the philosophical and metaphysical aspects of his expressions. The richness of these expressions, from a lexical viewpoint alone, teaches the reader a lot about the reach of the poet, about his expanse. There's saying in Hindi: 'the poet touches even what the sun cannot touch', which is fully relevant in the case of Tiwari.

Before Sahitya Akademi Tiwari has also served as the head of Hindi Department at Gorakhpur University, known for its high quality research and academic traditions. He has been awarded many times for his contribution to Hindi literature and criticism and the list of most important ones is as follows: Vyas Samman, Birla Foundation, Delhi, 2010; Hindi Gaurav Samman, Uttar Pradesh Hindi Sansthan, 2007; Sahitya Bhushan Samman, Uttar Pradesh Hindi Sansthan, 2000; Pushkin Samman (Award), Bharat Mitra Sangathan (India-Russia Friendship Organisation), 2003.

His works have been translated to Russian, English, Oriya, Kannada, Malayalam, Tamil, Marathi, Rajasthani, Bengali, Nepali and Gujarati languages; there are mostly Indian languages in this list than others. His academic and creative output is immense, with twelve books on research and literary criticism, seven poetry books, three travelogues and more than twenty books as editor. He also publishes and edits *Dastavez* (literal meaning: document), a literary magazine in circulation since 1978 that has a historical and invaluable literary value. Many of Tiwari's works have been subject of doctoral research and other books.

One important distinction between Tiwari and other contemporary Indian writers, especially those who have been translated to English and other European languages more, or those who directly write in English, is that he belongs to a species of intellectuals who don't gaze at the West to somehow perceive who they really are or what they would want to be. And as incongruent as it may seem, Hindi and other regional literatures in India, with almost eighteen official languages, have many authors and critics who belong to this species, more than one would like to believe.

In the end, a quote from the last line of Tiwari's autobiography:

"You inhabit every body in this universe, O Soul of the World! Forgive!

My journey started from darkness and I would have got lost in another darkness, unknown. I have thrown light on my doubts, enchantments and delusions - forgive me for this fault."

Tiwari's word is, undoubtedly, honest.

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