

My Father's Poetry¹

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Like most poets my father, Pandit Pratap Chandra Sharma, was a dreamer. He would be seen sitting on a rock in the farm in Sawani, Nausori, or standing with one foot on the digging fork, looking into vacant space, most likely composing a poem or a song. Books and writing paper were his constant company, and I am certain parts of his poems and songs were composed on the farm in Sawani.

The farm gave a panoramic view of the Sawani River, the valleys and mountains and lush vegetation. This was a perfect location for the cultivation of a poetic sensibility.

My father was essentially a family man; he liked spending time at home. His happiest moments were in the evenings, when free from daily chores, he would sit on his bed singing a song, reciting poems or elaborating on the philosophies behind the Ramayana or the Mahabharata to the family members huddled together listening to him with rapt attention.

His constant companions were the great poet saints-- Ved Vyas, Tulsi Das, Sur Das, Kabir, and Raskhan, Rahim-- as well as Prem Chand and Pandit Ram Chandra Sharma. They influenced not only his writing but also his way of thinking and his philosophy of life. Intimate knowledge of their works enabled him to speak competently on a range of philosophical topics. He was regarded as a scholarly person in the community.

My father's poems were composed on loose sheets of paper and were scattered everywhere in the house. He realized they needed to be put together in a book form before they were lost forever. In those days, in the 1930s and 40s, it wasn't easy to find sufficient funds to publish a book. However, he was determined to carry through his book project, and set out collecting funds in the Nausori and Levuka areas. There was a great deal of generosity in the community: the published book gives a list of

¹ This is Harish Sharma's Introduction to Chandra Pratap Sharma's *Pratap Kavitanjali* published in 2012 (Vicas Press, Lautoka).

donors; a number of them gave a pound each, one donor contributed fifteen pounds, and two others gave twenty five pounds each. Even in this poor community there were individuals who valued literature, and were willing to support the publication of a book. This is an early of instance of patronage given to creative writing in the community.

The book was published by *The Indian Times* in Suva in 1947. It was given the title *Prawas Bhajnanjali*, and it became a well-known publication in the Indo-Fijian community. The late Guru Dayal Sharma, founder of the weekly newspaper 'Shanti Dut', wrote in the introduction to the anthology,

It would be fair to say that this book echoes the inner feelings of a poet. The book possibly lacks the finer points of poetry but the use of words and expression of feelings are so moving that the reader is persuaded to praise the author's effort. It is noteworthy that the author is no (trained) poet; nor did he receive any formal education. In those dark days of indenture when our forefathers were undergoing extreme hardship, that Pundit Jamuna Prasad Sharma Ji gave his sons lessons in Hindi and elementary knowledge in the art of poetry is indeed praiseworthy. Pundit Jamuna Prasad Sharma Ji, over a long period, has been a well-known priest in Rewa, Fiji, and the author accompanied his father wherever the Pundit Ji went to perform his priestly duties. On the occasions of recital of the Ramayana, the explanation was summarised by the author. Such environment provided him the incentive to read religious books and epics and also delve into the art poetry.

The Pundit Jamuna Prasad Sharma referred to in the above quotation is our grandfather. A brief family history will be helpful in placing my father's work in perspective. Our great grandfather, Tulsi Ram, and our great grand mother, Parbati, came to Fiji from the village of Chandpore in the district of Azamgarh in Uttar Pradesh, India. On 23rd of January, 1888 they registered at Benares (present day Varanasi) as emigrants to Fiji, stating their caste as *chhatri* and *thakur* respectively. From Benares they came to Calcutta, where they were accommodated as indentured labourers at a depot for three weeks; then they boarded the ship *Hereford* which sailed for the Fiji Islands on the 14th of February, 1888. The ship reached Fiji on 28th April 1888. It is interesting to note that my grandfather was born on board the *Hereford* on 17th April 1888. He was registered as Kalika Prasad but was generally known as Jamuna Prasad.

After completing five years of indenture in the Rewa area, Tulsi Ram and his wife Parbati returned to India with their five year old son, Jamuna Prasad. They settled in the village of Rewati in the district of Basti in Uttar Pradesh. My grandfather's life makes an interesting story. In his homeland, he studied Hindi and carried out the duties of a *Sanatan* priest. At the age of 19 or 20, grandfather Jamuna Prasad enrolled at the Kashi Vidya Laya to study Sanskrit and astrology. He married Shringari at the age of twenty three. On or about the 4th of April, 1912 our grandmother gave birth to a son who was registered as Gobardhan and, as was the practice, given the name of Pratap Chandra Sharma. Thus my father was born in India but he didn't stay there very long. On 4th June, 1912 my grandparents and their son Pratap Chandra Sharma registered at Gorakhpur as emigrants to Fiji, and left Calcutta on board the *S.S. Ganges* on 12th June, 1912 for Fiji.

My grandparents served their five year *gimit* in Nausori district. It is a myth that has been perpetuated by the colonialists that all indentured Indians were illiterate. My grandfather, Jamuna Prasad, certainly wasn't illiterate. He was a competent scholar of Sanskrit, Hindi and astrology, and was in obvious demand to teach Hindi, and explain the great epics of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and perform religious rituals as a Pundit.

After indenture, as free individuals, my grandparents and their son settled on a twenty acre freehold property at Sawani, Nausori. Part of the property is still retained by our family.

My grandfather was something of a public intellectual. During indenture and the later years, the Hindu religion was sometimes viciously condemned by Christian missionaries. My grandfather valiantly defended his faith, often on a soap box, at the open grounds where the present day Municipal Market stands in Nausori town. Grandfather Jamuna Prasad was a simple Brahmin, learned, highly disciplined, generally a man of few words, almost an introvert, but he did not turn away from his responsibility as an educated member of his community. People of his generation long remembered him as a writer, poet, a scholar and a respected Pundit.

He had three sons and a daughter now, and grandfather gave them all lessons in Hindi. My father would go wherever grandfather went to perform his priestly work or to recite the scriptures. He would listen to the words grandfather uttered as he expounded on the great epics, observe the rituals with interest, and slowly began giving discourses on religious subjects in very simple language. With grandfather's encouragement, the world of poets and poetry opened up for him. The young mind absorbed

all it could about the way poetry was composed and recited. There was a long journey ahead of him as a writer. My father became an avid reader. He read whatever came to hand—books, magazines, newspapers. He cultivated an independent mind, and the farm in Sawani became his domain.

All my siblings were born and brought up in that domain. I was taken away by my maternal grandparents, uncles and aunts in Naitasiri, near Baulevu Landing. Thus I missed having close knowledge of my father's attraction for poetry and Hindi literature. I returned to Sawani once in a while as a visitor. My father was physically very strong; he would travel on his bicycle from the farm in Sawani to Baulevu Landing in Naitasiri to visit me and other members of the family. On his visits he would carry some books of poems, history or literature in Hindi. People in the area knew of his arrival, and would gather in the evening at our house to hear father read from the books he had brought with him. Among the books he read from were *Shoor Bir Bhajan Mala*, *Hindi Sahitya Chayan*, and *Maha Rana Pratap*. It might be said that he had a small mobile library that he carried on his bicycle. Apart from his knowledge of books and his fluency in Hindi, he possessed a captivating voice that made a strong impact on his audience. I was rather young to appreciate my father's knowledge and artistic talents.

There is one incident concerning my father that left a deep impression on me. In 1945, I was attending primary school from my maternal aunt's home in Koronivia. There was a wedding in the family nearby, and the celebrations started a day before at the bride's home. I went to attend the function. As I approached the house, I heard a familiar voice rendering the song *Jai Chand sari ke neecho ko and khoob mauj karte dekha*. The singer was my own father. He was playing the harmonium and singing with intense feeling. He was the centre of attention in the gathering, and he was enjoying it. When he finished his song, there was a tremendous applause. That was a brief moment when I recognized my father as an artist. The song I heard then has survived the passage of time, and one can still hear it being sung in certain gatherings.

Towards the end of 1944, the maternal side of my family moved to Nausori Town. Now it was possible for me to make greater contact with my grandfather, and to observe my father's developing interest in poetry.

My father continued to write and publish after his first book *Prawas Bhajnanjali* was published in 1947. In 1969, he wrote a booklet *Ramayan Pooja Bidhi* outlining in a succinct style the rituals preceding the recital of Ramayana. The booklet was written at the request of the late Wasu Deo Agrawal and Ram Lal Gupta, and also published by them. In his introduction to the booklet, Venilal Morris, himself a writer and editor of

the newspaper *Fiji Sandesh*, wrote: 'This booklet would undoubtedly be useful not only to the lovers of the Ramayan but also to the whole of the Hindu community. Being born in Fiji and not having the opportunity to learn Hindi or Sanskrit at any university, the writing of such a practical book by Pundit Pratap Chandra Sharma Ji is indeed very welcome.'

The inclusion of a photograph of the poet Ravindranath Tagore in the book is interesting. The only reason that I see for having Tagore's photo in the booklet is my father's deep reverence for the great poet and his philosophy. Written some forty years ago, the booklet is still in circulation in Fiji and the Fiji Indian diaspora.

It was mainly his book *Prawas Bhajnanjali* in 1947 that established him as one of the better known poets in Hindi in the country. Naturally I felt very proud of father's achievement. My own interest in poetry and literature grew from his discussions. He encouraged his children to read poetry and to try and compose poems. He explained to us the craft of composing poetry. At least three of his children gained from his instructions and Krishna Kala Pathak, Ajay Sharma and I have developed keen interest in poetry and have composed poems from time to time that appeared in local newspapers. One might say that ours was one of the early examples of a literary family in Fiji.

The main difference between my grandfather and my father was that while the former was somewhat introverted, the latter was an out and out extrovert. He liked his presence to be felt in any gathering, big or small. At home too he wanted to be the centre of attraction, especially when my mother was around.

He worked ceaselessly for the advancement of *Sanatan Dharm*, and was the founder and the first national president of *Brahmin Purohit Sabha of Fiji*. He was also the founding father of Rishikul School. He took keen interest in political development in the country. In recognition of his service to the community, he was given a number of awards, preserved by my younger brother Vidya Nand Sharma at his home in Brisbane.

My father took every opportunity to participate in gatherings of poets (*Kavi Sammelans*), in poetry competitions, and any function that featured poetry. His poems regularly appeared in newspapers. In 1959, Chandrika Prasad Shiriwastaw, Bhaskara Nand Mishra, Dewakar Prasad, Shavila Singh, Ambika Prasad and the Fiji Broadcasting Commission organized a *Kave Sammelan*. At that time I was a part-time radio announcer, and made a small contribution to the *Kavi Sammelan*. The programme had *kava* or *nagona* as its theme. The function was held live in the F.B.C. auditorium. Poets from all over Fiji were invited. Many appeared in person;

others sent their poems to be read by someone else on their behalf.

The *Kavi Sammelan* was officially opened by Mr. Bhasin, the High Commissioner for India in Fiji. Amongst the prominent guests at the function were Mr. and Mrs. Bhasin, Dr. Ram Lakhan, Mr. and Mrs. Jay Narayan, Mr. and Mrs. Moti Tikaram, Mr. and Mrs. Ratan and many others whose names evade me. The poets who participated were Mohan Singh Heer, Abhaya Nand Awasthi, S.B. Singh, R.S. Prasad and Pundit Pratap Chandra Sharma. I remember my father was the first poet who was called to read. He made a very good impression. The poet who had the audience cheering was Thakur Achaybar Singh who could not come, and had his poem read by Hari Deo Sugriva. The poem was hilarious, and the presenter managed to do justice to the poem's comic tone. It was composed in Fiji Hindi; I still remember the opening lines:

*Na to kabhi school gawa aur na kabhi bhoogol parha
Magar nagona ke baithak me master ji ko dhai ragra...*

There was much laughter well after the completion of the reading. In the mid-seventies, I visited Thakur ji at his home in Kavanagasau, Sigatoka and received a warm welcome. In that brief meeting, he impressed me with his immense wisdom and knowledge of Hindi literature. Even in that simple rural surrounding, he conveyed the impression of high culture.

Another prominent artist I came to appreciate was Suruj Pal of Yako, Nadi. He was a singer who trained many young people in music. He had few equals at the time in composing Holi *geet*, *jhoomar* in particular. He composed many patriotic songs when the freedom struggle was going on in India. He was popularly known as Hindi Lal, a pseudonym that appeared at the end of his composition.

It is a serious loss that artists like Suruj Pal, Thakur Achaybar Singh, Prem Yogi Maan, Mohan Singh Heer, Ram Narayan Kovid are no longer around or remembered by our people. These authors can still offer inspiration to those who aspire to write in Hindi. My father was more fortunate. He is remembered when discussion turns to Hindi poetry. I shall give a couple of examples. Deo Darshan Kumar is brother-like to me, a close friend of some three decades. We didn't discuss my father's poetry until November 2009, in Sydney, when I casually mentioned *Prawas Bhajnanjali*. Deo immediately recited several lines from the book: *Hindustaniyo se wakif hay kul zamana, Utho Bharitiye veeron saajo samar bhayankar baane ko, Jai Chand Sari ke neecho ko*, and others. After reciting the poems, he told me many of the poems on Sanatan Hindu weddings were popular in the 1940s and 1950s and artists chose them to sing at social functions, giving great joy to those present.

My younger brother, Ajay Sharma, participated in a wedding cere-

mony in Vancouver, Canada, where some artists were entertaining the guests with their songs. Amongst them was a blind singer who melodiously rendered one song after another from *Prawas Bhajnanjali*. After this recital, Ajay approached the blind artist, and asked, 'Bhaiya, what is the source of the songs you have been singing?' The artist replied that some forty years ago a person by the name of Pundit Pratap Chandra Sharma published a book called *Prawas Bhajnanjali* and he had learnt songs by heart from the book. In those days the artist could see. Barely controlling his emotion, Ajay told the blind artist that Pundit Pratap Chandra Sharma was his father. Thereupon the two clung to each other, lost in the memory of days gone by.

It is difficult to assess the effect my father's poems have on the present generation of Indo-Fijians. Some of the poems, written sixty years ago for special occasions, cannot be expected to have the same appeal today. They would be of interest to literary historians. There are several other poems, such as *Ulti Reet*, *Mahapurush Kahlata Hai*, *Jeevan ki Yahi Kahani Hai*, *Karamshah Samay Badalta Hai*, *Iss se Gaflat Har Baar Hua*, *Ek Nazar Dekho*, *In Dino*, *Ram Naumi*, that are notable for their human theme and artistic quality.

When the poems were first published, they were praised by writers like Pundit Gurudayal Sharma and Venilal Morris. In a sense, I have been rediscovering my father's poetry. In recent years, both writers in Hindi and English have also 'rediscovered' the value of his poetry. The well-known Hindi writer, J.S. Kanwal, has translated poems from *Prawas Bhajnanjali* in his literary history *Fiji Mein Hindi ke Sau Warsh*. That a literary critic of Vijay Mishra's eminence chose to give such close scrutiny to *Keni Peni* shows the esteem in which Pundit Pratap Chandra Sharma is held by those who value literature. Mishra wrote in the centennial volume, commemorating Fiji Indians' hundred years in the islands, entitled *The Indo-Fijian Literature* edited by Subramani:

Given the extremely powerful, even poetic, nature of the experience, the sad thing is that fiction has taken such a long time to establish itself. Of course there were Indian writers such as Tota Ram Sanadhya and Pandit Amichand (both Indian expatriates) and Pundit Pratap Chandra Sharma and Kamla Prasad (local Indo-Fijian writers) who have tried to capture something of the intensity of the Indenture experience in their Hindi writings. Pandit Pratap Chandra's poem *Keni Peni* is especially important in that, although it deals with the lives of two Fijian boys during and after *bari bimari* (the great plague) of 1917—18, it is presented very much through Indian sensitivity as microcosmic rendering, in fact, of the

dreams and expectations of the Indentured labourers generally. In many ways Sharma's verse predates the conscious search for meaning which one finds in the fiction of contemporary Indo-Fijian writers, particularly in the works of Nandan and Subramani.

More recently, Mohit Prasad, himself an established poet in English, commented in *Bitter Sweet*, a book edited by Brij Lal, on my father's poem about soccer:

In the largely religious and mythological realm of most early Indo-Fijian poetry and folk song compositions, soccer was elevated to the pantheons. Pundit Pratap Chandra Sharma, a well known Indo-Fijian poet and folk song lyricist from Rewa, wrote the following song (translated by J.S. Kanwal from Hindi):

*Of all the ball games
Soccer is the most beautiful
Each limb is rejuvenated in action
At play fascinating is the skilful.
'There will be a game of soccer'
This news creates sensation around
Filling excitement in their hearts
People crowd together in the ground...*

The poem found currency in written form as a published work and became the subject of oral performance as it was turned into a folk song. There is a clear emphasis on the idea of universal brotherhood (soccer being male and patriarchal) and commonality of purpose from 'soccer men' who 'get prize cups' from the 'hands of the Governor'. The notion of receiving the 'prize cup' from the Governor relates directly to the usual practice of the colonial British Governor usually being the patron of Fiji Soccer and chief guest at the prize giving. The links between soccer in the 'most beautiful' and notions of physical beauty and exercise are maintained alongside the idea of a 'clean fight with feet' and the spiritual dimension of creative play that transcends all barriers as 'mutual differences are forgotten' at the news 'there will be a game of soccer.'

The poem *Ek din Munna gaya bazaar* caught the attention of the curriculum writers in the Ministry of Education and was included in Hindi textbook list for Primary Schools for a number of years. The poem shows the author's versatility; his poetry appealed to the young as well as the general reader. It is worth mentioning this as so little is being written creatively for children in Hindi these days. Writing for children came naturally to my father.

On the morning of 6 March 1978, my father's eventful life came to an end. His passing away was deeply mourned by family and friends and fellow writers. Tributes poured in from many leading citizens of Fiji. I hope that this publication will keep alive his knowledge, wisdom and his art.

His poems divide themselves into two parts. The first part consists of poems published in *Prawas Bhajnanjali*. The individual poems carried his name, so they aren't difficult to identify. The poems that were composed after the late forties do not bear his name. However there is no doubt about their authorship. In editing the poems, I have made minor changes to the original texts in terms of diction. At first I attempted some modification, for example, in the poem *Dekho*, he wrote *kyon na jor se chalti hay Fiji Swaraj ki gadhi*; I changed it to *...Raj vyawastha ki gadhi* which is heavy and cumbersome; so I had to go back to my father's simpler version. In one or two instances, I have been more squeamish than my father. The last line of the same poem reads, *Ab poora chutar deko* which I changed to *Chuppa maal khulkar dekho*; that I see as rather insipid and I had to go back to father's original. He was certainly ahead of his times in matters of taste and tastelessness! Again in a poem entitled *Wahi daal katen*, I deleted the last two lines, *Na choti, na darhi, na mochhen hai inke; Oopar hai julfe aur neeche hai....* The last word was left out. The word was obviously *jhaante*, and I'm now tempted to insert the word in the blank.

Finally, I know the importance of my father's poetry in terms of literary history, and therefore I have attempted no alteration to the meaning, content or intention of the poems. I hope the book will inspire others in Fiji to write.