

Prof. Niranjan Bhagat



Somewhere around 1940, the nationalist and social consciousness of the Gandhian era in Gujarati poetry gave way to a consciousness of the aesthetic. The poet Prahlad Parekh (1911-1962) initiated a process which got further perfected in the hands of Harishchandra Bhatt (1906-1950), Rajendra Shah (1913) and **Niranjan Bhagat (1926)**. These poets created a whole new world of poetry in which the progressive bent disappeared and there was an all-pervading air of enchanting, natural beauty. The emotion of love appeared in bright, solid colours accompanied by beautiful rhymes and metres. Both lyricism and poetic language find a full-throated expression as keen images and sensuous symbols interweave with melody. This is how Niranjan Bhagat's poetry took shape when it first appeared in Gujarati.

'Chhandolaya' (1943) and 'Kinnari' (1959) brought to us poems Niranjan Bhagat had written since 1943. The red hand-made cover of 'Chhandolaya' and the yellow of 'Kinnari' added a dash of colour to Gujarati poetry. These collections created a new note; a beginning of what is called in historical terms, 'Rajendra-Niranjan Yug.' The Age of Rajendra-Niranjan was the one following that of Sundaram and Umashankar. With 'Alpaviram' (1954) and the second edition of 'Chhandolaya' (which included the 'Pravaldeep' group of poems), Gujarati literature was exposed to a metropolitan consciousness and modernist trends for the first time. With this, Niranjan Bhagat established himself as a major poet of the language. The experience of a modern city in Niranjan Bhagat's poetry emerges through a modernist sensibility. After the publication of 'Tetrees Kavyo' (1958), the poet withdrew from the world of poetry. However, his ties with poetry were not severed. They continue in the form of research, criticism, lectures and the activity of translation.

Niranjan Bhagat has always been an urban poet, unlike his predecessors Umashankar, Sundaram and Rajendra who moved to the cities after a rural life. Niranjan was born in the textile city-Ahmedabad. Save a few years in Mumbai, Niranjan Bhagat's childhood, adolescence and youth were all spent in Ahmedabad.

Niranjan Bhagat was born in businessman's family and originally his last name was 'Gandhi'. His grandfather was an active member of a 'bhajan-mandali' and hence came to be known as Bhagat. His descendants adopted this title as their surname. Niranjan's father was Narhari Bhagat and mother Mena. The poet was born in a 'pol' next to a famous vaishnav temple. While the temple's proximity made some impact on the poet's mind, its religiosity did not. Niranjan's uncle Ram Bhagat was an exemplary student of English Literature and studied Law in London for a few years. The uncle had an untimely death. However, among the things he left behind-books etc.-was a map of London. This injected a desire in the young Niranjan to travel in the city of London. The desire found fulfillment to the extent that since 1982 Niranjan Bhagat has been visiting London every year.

Niranjan's primary education was in municipal school. The poet himself refers to those years of childhood as 'le vert paradis des amours enfantines'. The poet has continued to search for that childhood through his poetry. The most tragic event of Niranjan's family and his personal life took place when his father renounced home in 1936. Niranjan was ten years old then. There has been no news from his father since then. Niranjan's poetry reflects a quest for childhood as well as for

the father. Once the father left home, Niranjana spent seventeen years with his mother's family. The feeling of loneliness and isolation felt by the poet at the age of ten has continued to be a part of the unmarried poet's life. His poetry sometimes reflects it and at times counters it. Niranjana's teacher Amubhai Pandya was one of the significant persons who engendered a poetic sensibility in Niranjana. In those days, 'Purvalap' a collection of Kant's poetry was a passion with Niranjana.

Rabindranath Tagore died in 1941. The experience of reading 'Gitanjali' was a profound one for Niranjana Bhagat. He wrote about 100 poems in English in the style of 'Gitanjali'. He taught himself Bengali to read Rabindranath in the original. He even tried his hand at writing in Bengali. In 1943 he wrote his first song 'Sonalu' and his famous poem 'Jagruti' in Gujarati.

From 1944 to 1946 Niranjana Bhagat completed his Intermediate Arts from L.D. Arts College and then enrolled himself for a B.A. with English Literature in Elphinstone College, Mumbai. Living in Mumbai brought a profound, yet tangible difference to Niranjana's poetic consciousness. The poet completed his M.A. in 1950 and joined L.D. Arts College as a lecturer. After teaching in various colleges, Niranjana Bhagat retired from St. Xavier's College in 1986. However, Niranjana is a very active member of the literary circle in Ahmedabad. Presently he lives in Ahmedabad with his aged mother.

The immediate impact of the first collection 'Chhandolaya' is that of love - the joy and celebration of an oblivious love. However, there is an element of pathos in it. The heady voice of 'Madiramaya Javani' suggests a ready-to-burst youthfulness. The passionate outburst in 'Sudhamaya Varuni' is a full realization of that youthfulness. For the first time we see a vigorous and bold expression of love in an unselfconscious manner. Then takes place a shift from a romantic outlook to a realistic one. The poet looks around and his restless energy finds a direction. A different sensibility is grafted which responds to a whole set of external events - independence of the nation, partition, communal bloodshed, the assassination of Gandhi, the moral failure of the leaders. The consciousness underlying these experiences is that of a modern citizen. In the meanwhile poetic language underwent a change. Niranjana sheds traditional poetic language under and adopts the unadorned manner of the older poets. Niranjana Bhagat communicates this shift not by 'statement' but through striking images and symbols.

It is hardly a matter of surprise that Niranjana Bhagat came under the influence of western modernism with his wide range of exposure and experience as a teacher of English Literature. His poetic consciousness has been constituted by poets like Baudelaire, Pound, Eliot, Auden and Rilke. Niranjana Bhagat's poetry indicates the first contact Gujarati poetry made with modernism. The poem 'Sansmruti' in 'Chhandolaya' is its starting point. The poem is about a feeling of agony felt by the poet as he welcomes the first anniversary of India's independence. Today, in the year of its fiftieth anniversary the poem has become more meaningful. The 'happy event' is inextricably tied in with the partition and Gandhi's assassination. 'Sansmruti' is a skillful achievement in its deft employment of the Jhulana chhand and Niranjana's use of the same invokes Narsinh Mehta's context and invests it with a new metaphor.

In 'Pravaldeep', a group of poems included in the selected edition of 'Chhandolaya', inheres a balanced and seasoned expression of modernism. Critics have drawn parallels between 'Pravaldeep' and Baudelaire's 'Tableaux Parisiens' from 'Les Fleurs du Mal'. Mumbai is the *raison d'être* of 'Pravaldeep'. Though 'Pravaldeep' is about times, places and characters in Mumbai; yet it is more of psychic geography than merely physical. The title 'Pravaldeep' (Coral Island) is symbolic like Eliot's 'The Waste Land'. It evokes the picture of this island city poised to sink anytime. The poet goes as far as to predict a geographical annihilation of the city:

Come, let's go to Bombay city,

That tallies crocodile!

.....

Grass will spring one day in every street,

The coral build its home here.

Before that happens, you must go;

Time invites you; you should go and see.

Titles such as 'Fountainna Busstop par'. 'Churchgatethi Localman', 'Falkland Road' (the infamous red-light area), ' Colaba Par Suryast' indicate clearly the subject matter of the poems. 'Patro' is unique poem in 'Pravaldveep'. It has monologues by 'characters' such as a poet, a beggar, a prostitute, a leper, a blind man and a hawker - this then is the essence of this metropolis, 'the great leprous city'. 'Pravaldveep' is a unique creation as far as the use of irony as an expressive tool is concerned. The use of colloquial language is also very apt in 'Pravaldveep'. The poet refers to a city like Mumbai as an 'Adhunik Aranya' (A Modern Forest) where 'fierce creatures -humans- roam this forest'.

'Gayatri' is the pinnacle of not just 'Pravaldveep' but Niranjan Bhagat's entire creative output. Niranjan Bhagat's use of the Anushtup chhand in this poem ranks him along with his other two great predecessors, Kavi Nanalal (1877-1946) and Sundaram (1908-1991). Their poems in Anushtup 'Pitrutarpan' and '13:07ni Local' respectively were also highly acclaimed. 'Gayatri' consists of a 100 couplets in Anushtup. The sun is the leitmotif of 'Gayatri'.

Niranjan Bhagat started contributing to the field of criticism in the late '40s. Niranjan has been engaging in 'Practical Criticism' - concerned largely with the aesthetic principles governing poetry. For the last five decades, he has informally, been Gujarat's 'Professor of Poetry'. Thorough his recitations and discussions, he has created a literary audience sentient to the Gujarati poems of the Rajendra-Niranjan Yug as well as poetry from the continent. He has been regularly giving talks on poetry around-the-world at the Gujarati Sahitya Parishad's Govardhan Bhavan.

As a critic Niranjan Bhagat foregrounds the universal features of a poem and establishes high academic standards through his criticism. His notes on Rajendra Shah's 'Dhvani' (1951) lays the ground for a symbolist movement in Gujarati poetry. While talking of Gujarati poetry, Niranjan Bhagat often draws parallels with world poetry. The range of his criticism is equally wide. His research has been on Gujarati poetry as well as world poetry. The outcome of his research is the publication of 'Svadhyaaylok' (Eight Volumes, 1997) on his 71st birthday. This marks an important stage in Gujarati criticism.

Volume I of 'Svadhyaaylok' called 'Kavi ane Kavita' discusses the principles of poetry. The subsequent volumes are an engagement in Practical Criticism. Volume 2 deals with English literature, Volume 3 with European literature and Volume 4 with American and other literature. Of the three volumes dealing with Gujarati literature, the third one is based on a study of the modern age in Gujarati and its four main figures - Balvantrai, Nanalal, Sundram and Umashankar. For someone who is usually a very private person, the last volume of 'Svadhyaaylok' is quite

interesting. Niranjan here writes about his senior contemporaries and relates in a personal tone the development of his creativity.

In addition to creative writing, criticism and editing, Niranjan has established a significant place for himself even in the field of translation. He has translated many Bengali poems of Rabindranath Tagore into Gujarati. He has also rendered Tagore's verse-play 'Chhiringada' into Payar chhand. His translation of 'Svapnavasavasavadattam' (The Vision of Vasavadatta, Penguin, 1972) was enacted in the United States. Niranjan Bhagat has also translated 'The Book of Job' from the Bible and the poetry of the medieval mystic poet St. John of the Cross. In the target language, the former work is known as 'Job' and the latter translated work as 'Ashtapadi'.

Niranjan Bhagat was awarded the 'Kumar Chandrak' in 1949 for the best contribution to the monthly 'Kumar' during the year. In 1957, his collection 'Chhandolay' was adjudged as the best collection of poems during the previous five years and he was awarded the 'Narmad Suvarna Chandrak'. In 1969, he received the 'Ranjitram Suvarna Chandrak' for his outstanding contribution to Gujarati literature.

From 1978 to 1982 he was a member of the General Council of Sahitya Academy, New Delhi. **Recently he has been elected president of Gujarati Sahitya Parishad. (1997-98)**

A Select Bibliography

Poetry

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- Kinnari, Ahmedabad, Indradhanu, 1950, 64p.
- Alpaviram, Ahmedabad, Kavilok, 1954, 44p.
- Chhandolaya (Selected), Bomabay, Vora and Company, 1957, 179p.
- 33 Kavyo, Ahmedabad, Ravni Prakashn Gruh, 1958, 1964, 33p.
- Chhandolaya (Collected), Ahmedabad, Vora and Company, 1974, 280p. Second Edition, Ahmedabad, Gurjar Granthratna Karyalaya, 1997, 296p

LITERARY CRITICISM

- Adhunik Kavita, Ahmedabad, Vora and Company, 1972, 60p.
- Yantravignan ane Mantrakavita, Ahmedabad Vora & Company 1975, 192p.
- Mira, Ahmedabad, Sadbhava Prakashan, 1982, 107p.
- Svadhyaylok-1 : Kavi ane Kavita, Ahmedabad Gurjar Granthratna Karyalaya, 1997, 336p.
- Svadhyaylok-2 : Angreji Sahitya, Ahmedabad Gurjar Granthratna Karyalaya, 1997, 256p.
- Svadhyaylok-3 : Europeaya Sahitya, Ahmedabad, Gurjar Granthratna Karyalaya, 1997, 388p.
- Svadhyaylok-4 : American ane Anya Sahitya, Ahmedabad, Gurjar Granthratna Karyalaya, 1997, 215p.
- Svadhyaylok-5 : Gujarati Sahitya- Purvardha, Ahmedabad, Gurjar Granthratna Karyalaya, 1997, 262p.
- Svadhyaylok-6 : Gujarati Sahitya Uttarardh, Ahmedabad, Gurjar Granthratna Karyalaya, 1997, 244p.
- Svadhyaylok-7 : Balvantrai, Nanalal, Sundaram, Umashankar, Ahmedabad, Gurjar Granthratna Karyala, 1997, 395p.
- Svadhyaylok-8 : Angat, Ahmedabad, Gurjar Granthratna Karyalaya, 1997, 150p.

TRANSLATION

- Chitrangada (Translation of Rabindranath Tagore's 'Chitrangada'), Ahmedabad, Darpana, 1965, 50p.
- The Vision of Vasavadatta (Translation of Bhasa's 'Svapnavasavadattam', included in 'Four Classical Asian Plays'), Baltimore, Maryland, Penguin Books, 1972, 29-79p.
- Job (Translation of 'The Book of Job' from the Bible, included in 'Sampurna Bible'), Anand, Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1981, 666-697p.
- Ashtapadi (Translation of 8 Poems of St. John of the Cross, Published in 'Parab'), Ahmedabad, Gujarati Sahitya Parishad, 1994, 3-17p.

A Chronology

- 1926 Born 18 May at Ahmedabad
- 1943 First Poem 'Sonalu' Composed
- 1944 First Poem 'Jagruti' Published in 'Kumar'
- 1946 Read English Literature for B.A. Degree at Elphinstone College, Mumbai for two years.
- 1949 First collection of poems 'Chhandolaya' Published in 'Kumar' during the year
- 1950 Second collection of poems 'Kinnari' published.
Obtained an M.A. in English Literature, University of Bombay
Appointed Lecturer in English, L.D. Arts College, Ahmedabad.
- 1953 Joined G.L.S. Arts College, Ahmedabad
- 1954 Third collection poems 'Alpaviram' published
- 1956 Joined B.D. Arts College, Ahmedabad.
Edited 'Sahitya Sadhana' - a weekly literary column in a local daily for two years.
- 1957 Fourth collection of poems 'Chhandolaya' (Selected poems from previous collections with addition of 'Pravaldivdeep', a group of sixteen poems on Mumbai) published.
Awarded 'Narmad Suvarna Chandrak'
- 1958 Fifth collection of poems '33 Kavyo' published Rejoined G.L.S. Arts College, Ahmedabad
- 1961 Translated 'Chitrangada' from Bengali into Gujarati.
- 1963 Translated 'Svapnavasavadattam' from Sanskrit into English
- 1969 Awarded 'Ranjitram Suvarna Chandrak'
- 1972 Critical essay 'Adhunik Kavita' published
- 1974 Sixth collection of poems 'Chhandolaya' (Collected) published
- 1975 Joined St. Xavier's College, Ahmedabad
Critical Essay 'Yantravignan ane Mntrakavita' published
- 1976 President, Sahitya Section, Gujarati Sahitya Parishad at Porbandar.
- 1977 Edited 'Granth', a monthly magazine of reviews for one year.
- 1978 Member, General Council, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi for five years
Edited 'Sahitya' a literary quarterly for two years.
- 1980 Translated 'The Book of Job' from the Bible into Gujarati
- 1982 First visited England, France, Italy, Greece
Critical essay 'Mira' published
- 1985 Invited to U.S.A. by Gujarati Sahitya Akademi of North America for poetry reading and lectures in several cities across the country.
- 1986 Retired from St. Xavier's College, Ahmedabad
- 1992 Translated 8 poems of St. John of the cross from Spanish into Gujarati
- 1994 Honoured as 'Murdhanya Sahityakar' by Gujarat Sahitya Akademi
- 1997 Critical essays 'Svadyaylok' in eight volumes published

- Elected President, Gujarati Sahitya Parishad
- 1998 Awarded 'Premanand Suvarna Chandrak'
- 1999 Awarded 'Puraskar' for 'Svadyaylok-volumes 5 and 6' by Gujarat Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi
- 2000 Honoured with 'Sachchidanand Sanman' by Gujarati Sahitya Parishad
- 2001 Awarded 'Narsinh Mehta Award'
- 2004 Critical essays 'Sahityacharya' published
- 2007 Seventh Collection of Poetry 'Punashcha' published

At- translating Baudelaire's Les Fleurs du Mal'and 'Petits poems en present, prose' from French into Gujarati