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Krishna Sobti: A Writer Who Radiated Bonhomie

Lakshmi Kannan

Post Master House, Summer Hill, Shimla. That is where I got to know this legendary writer Krishna Sobti, who carried the weight of her name very lightly. Unlike many famous writers who choose to insulate themselves within a space that they claim as exclusive, Krishnaji's immense zest for life, her interest in people, her genuine interest in the works of other writers, and her gift for finding humour in the most unlikely situations made her a very friendly, warm and caring person who touched our lives in myriad ways.

Krishnaji left us on 25th January this year, leaving behind a tangible absence. Of her it can be truly said that she lived her life to the hilt, scripting a magnificent life for herself while illuminating the lives of many others who had the good fortune to know her. No wonder the Auditorium at Triveni, Delhi, was packed to capacity during the Prayer Meeting on 28th January, with friends, readers and admirers of all ages spilling on the aisles and the corridors. It was indeed an eloquent testimony to the love and respect Krishnaji enjoyed, as each speaker highlighted her warmth, laughter and wit that sparkled mischievously through the twinkle in her eyes.

Like any of her avid readers, I grew up absorbing the unusual themes she explored in her books. Sometimes I returned to the same book at different stages in my life and dug up new perspectives. Sobti scholars have written reams of articles on her books and her political affiliations. I shall share how Krishnaji connected with people affectionately, even if she unsparingly gave that occasional sharp rap on the knee as a stern measure against anything she considered as 'excess baggage'. One is grateful for that as well!

I was fortunate to have been a Fellow at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, at the same time when Krishnaji was invited as a National Fellow. That is when I got to know her as a writer who is most generous with her time unlike those who wear their 'busyness' on their sleeve to look important. But Krishnaji would interact with some of us like she had all the time in the world!

We, the selected Fellows, arrived in Shimla from different parts of the country to work on our selected projects. It took us a while to shake off the distractions of the lush and idyllic ambience of the Shimla Institute and get on earnestly with our work. But that was not all. We had to first contend with the monkeys and langurs that swarmed around like they were the actual, native Resident-Fellows who belonged. They roamed around freely with a cavalier attitude, snatching things from our hands, making faces, stalking us menacingly, and even mimicking us with a snarl if we tried to shoo them off. It was clear that they looked upon us as intruders from the plains. We conferred with each other to plan how best to tackle this 'monkey menace'. More about the monkeys later.

We moved into the accommodation provided on the estate of Summer Hill. Krishnaji was allotted a flat that was called the 'Post Master's House', a term carried on from the British times. She would hold an Open House ever so often and invite some of us over for a chat over tea, or drinks in the evenings. Some of her guests included major writers who were invited by the Institute for a talk or a seminar - Bhisham Sahni, his wife Sheilaji, Nirmal Verma, Professor U.R. Anantha Murthy, Krishnaji's companion

Shivnath, an eminent translator and critic, Professor Jaidev from H.P. University – all of who are sadly no more with us. Very often, Professor Mrinal Miri, who was then the Director of the Institute, would join us with his wife Professor Sujatha. Dr. Miri is perhaps the first and the only Director who had writers as Fellows that year.

Krishnaji's *soirees* had an informal ambience, with conversation buzzing in a friendly, convivial atmosphere. A magical change would come over the medium-sized Post Master's House. It enlarged into a large space where we had no inhibition sharing a range of issues that plague writers - the ageing and 'greying' of manuscripts languishing with some publishers, themes that lay dormant within us, incubating for months on end, waiting to take shape, or the creative failure of an otherwise good idea. I shared my experience of a story I wrote in Tamil in which Champa, the woman protagonist, actually feels relieved and 'happy' when her abusive, alcoholic husband dies. Sure enough, the story never saw the light of day in Tamil. Editors and friends descended on me like a ton of bricks and asked 'How *can you* show a woman as 'happy' when her husband dies?' The story was resurrected a few years later in English and Hindi translation. This time Champa was accepted on her own terms. Krishnaji and Bisham Sahni said that we need to wait for the readiness in people to accept a change in values, and that can come only with time. Krishnaji created a circle in which nobody was under any obligation to pretend to be a 'big success' or wear that smug smile that he/she has "arrived". The greats equally shared the uncertainties they encountered in their writing career, the interference of ruling political leaders in literary matters, the ephemeral nature of fame, failing health and so on.

Who would want to miss out on these meetings? One day, as I walked toward the Post Master House for yet another evening soiree, I got late because of the monkey menace. I crouched in a shelter and waited for the monkeys and the langurs to go away. The langurs were having a great time swinging from branch to branch like trapeze artists in a circus before they filed out. 'You're late,' said Krishnaji and inquired if everything was okay. I mentioned the monkeys. 'Don't resist them Lakshmi,' she counselled. 'Make friends with them. They've their sensitivities too.' *Make friends with monkeys? Just how?*

Krishnaji recounted an incident that she only heard about, because it happened when she was an infant. A monkey came into the house, picked up the baby Krishna Sobti, then jumped up to perch on a beam above. The entire household watched stunned, with her mother alarmed beyond belief. Then she, her mother, sang a *lori*, a lullaby, her eyes fixed on her baby in the arms of the monkey. The monkey glanced at her from above, and just listened to the beat and the rhythm of the lullaby, totally subdued for a moment. And then it slowly descended, holding the baby Krishna Sobti in its arms, placed her quietly on the ground and went out of the house. *Thank you monkey*, I said silently, with a prayer in my heart. Because of your kind gesture, today we've this splendid lady Krishna Sobti. And her memorable books. *Thanks!*

Fellowship over, we knew that we would disperse and get lost in the din, the dust, the noise and pollution of the plains, with Shimla fading off like a dream. But Krishnaji proved us wrong. She stayed in touch, ever the caring friend whose laughter was carefree, with a naughty, puckish humour that had its pride of place in her personality. She made me love life a little more. I shall remember her freshness and warmth with immense gratitude. Always. She was a natural.

BIO-NOTE

Dr Lakshmi Kannan is a bilingual author: besides English, she writes in Tamil under the *nom de plume* 'Kaaveri'. She writes across genres and many of her works are a part of the syllabus in universities and schools. Her books in English include her latest novel *The Glass Bead Curtain* (2016, Vitasta, New Delhi), that has been prescribed for the Post-Graduate course in English in the Universities of Rajasthan, at Jaipur and Ajmer. The novel was recently short listed for two major awards. She has four collections of poems, and in translation, a novel and collections of short fiction that she translated from her original in Tamil - *Going Home* (1999), *Nandanvan & Other Stories* (2011) and *Genesis: Select Stories* (2014), all of them published by Orient BlackSwan, New Delhi. She has published a novel and several collections of short fiction in Tamil. They have been widely translated into French, English, Hindi and other regional languages. Lakshmi received Resident Fellowships from the International Writing Program, University of Iowa, USA; the University of Canterbury, Kent, U.K. on a Charles Wallace Trust Fellowship; the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, Sahitya Akademi, Delhi and Cambridge U.K as a British Council Visitor. She has written extensively on gender issues, translation and the politics of 'regional' and 'national' literature. She presented papers at the International Feminist Book Fairs at Montreal, Toronto and Amsterdam. She has worked on the faculty of English in Hyderabad, Kolkata and Delhi.

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