

 This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0

**Mahuya Bhaumik**

### The Journey of a Poet: An Interview of Bibhu Padhi

Bibhu Padhi is one of the leading bi-lingual poets of India in present day. He writes extensively in both English and Oriya languages. He is also a literary critic and translator. Some of his notable collections of poems are *Painting the House* (1999), *Going to the Temple* (2008), the book chapter *Living with Lorenzo* (2003) and *Magic Ritual* (2014) to name a few. His scholarly works include the much-acclaimed *D. H. Lawrence: Modes of Fictional Style* (1989) and *Indian Philosophy and Religion: A Reader's Guide* (1990) co-authored with Minakshi Padhi.

**Mahuya Bhaumik** Your poetry is a perfect example of the amalgamation of rural landscapes and cityscapes, please comment on this observation.

**Bibhu Padhi** It has something to do with the place where I was born and brought up. Cuttack is a large village and a small town. When I was young I would bicycle down all the lanes and by lanes of Cuttack to get a flavour of what is called the real Cuttack. Apart from this I have experiences of villages too. I always want to stay in a village for a couple of days in the interiors of Odisha. All of these have influenced my writing.

**MB** Your poems have been published in such reputed magazines as *Queen's Quarterly*, *Poetry Wales*, *Illustrated Weekly of India*, *Encounter* and many others. What is your reaction to this?

**BP** There is a funny side too. I submit my poems and wait for the editor's decision very eagerly. However, once the poems are accepted and published in a magazine I suddenly lose interest in the magazine itself. I never go back to the magazine. I think the most beautiful thing about it is the waiting for the editor's decision.

**MB** How do you look at your journey as a poet from innocence to maturity?

**BP** I started writing poems when I was in my Master's class. I used to send those to a magazine called *Dialogue India* published by Pritish Nandy, who used to write great poetry himself but has now moved into film production. He always used to write up just one word every time I sent him my poems. The word was 'extra ordinary'. I loved to see my poems in print. However, the poems were, I think, a little too sentimental, a little too romantic and a little too immature. They were all ruckus. I gave up writing poetry for four years.

I used to suffer in those days from migraine and used to take analgesics. One day I took three analgesic tablets on empty stomach. They cut the stomach wall and I vomited about two litres of blood. I was immediately admitted to the hospital where I had to stay for

fifteen days in what was called "The Extra Medical Ward". During my fifteen days of stay, I must have seen as many as twelve deaths. It seemed everyone was dying. I remember clearly two of those deaths – the death of a young boy who died of liver failure and the death of a young man who died of cancer. When I returned home I wrote two poems on these two deaths and sent these to a magazine which was the most prestigious in the country called *Quest*. They published them. It was in 1975. I started writing poetry seriously since that year. Pritish Nandy always used to tell me, "Bibhu why don't you publish your first book? Its high time you did". My first book *Going to the Temple* was published in the 1979. Since then I have published 11 books of poetry. My poems have been published in distinguished magazines and anthologies throughout the English-Speaking world. I cannot say if my poetry is mature. My wife, who has always been the first reader of my poems, says that I've grown a lot since the publication of my first book But I think I cannot now write the poems that I wrote in my first book. They were highly imagistic and concrete. Recently – which is to say for the past three years – I have been experimenting with couplets. I know for sure that couplets cannot be used to convey depth of meaning but they have their own charm as well. I've observed that many European poets have experimented with the couplet form with a lot of success.

**MB** Which Western literary figures have influenced you?

**BP** To start with, several European, Latin American as well as American poets have influenced me, for instance, Pablo Neruda, Giuseppe Ungaretti, Octavio Paz, Cesare Pavese, Salvatore Quasimodo, Emily Dickinson, James Merrill Whitman, William Stafford among others. The major themes of my poetry include memory, family, night, the sea, innocence, ancestors.

**MB** You have often talked of life as celebration. Do you think that both body and mind are integral parts of this celebration?

**BP** Surely, the mind always wants to celebrate life and there are times when the body fails to cooperate with the mind. I must tell you that I have many poems which are sad and far from any celebration.

**MB** The use of metaphors in your poetry encompasses a wide range from the personal to the universal. What helped you to choose from such a wide range of metaphors?

**BP** I have a poem titled "Perhaps" in which I have used metaphors which came from the cosmic sphere – it is one of my own favourites. Most of my metaphors are personal in nature. In a poem like "Happiness", for example, the last line is "a touch of kinship / It feels nice on the skin". My early poems were full of metaphors. My recent poems do not have many metaphors. I do not choose metaphors for their own sake. If a metaphor does not come to me effortlessly I don't use it. Metaphoric language has a dimension of its own

**MB** How important is the role of memory in your poetry?

**BP** My work is replete with memories. Nostalgia and a lost world appear in my poetry very often. I think recently almost every poem of mine has been nostalgic. One cannot live without memory. Memory is real; I have a poem called "Letter to my Wife" in which I talk about the slow growth of our children and their slow moving away from us. They have learnt their own language which is so different from ours. It seems it is impossible to live without memory.

**MB** You have confirmed that certain Indian literary figures have had a palpable influence on you. In what ways have they shaped your personality?

**BP** Jayanta Mahapatra has read all my poems. During almost my early writing career, he influenced me a great deal. I love Mehrotra's use of imagery and the terseness of his verse. I talked about my experimentations with the couplet. One of the finest Indian poets, R. Parthasarathi, has written many poems in couplets very successfully. Sahid's poetry is very intense and I have been influenced by his intensity.

**MB** Mythology is an integral part of your poetry. Have you incorporated mythology in your creative process consciously or spontaneously?

**BP** I think it comes to me spontaneously. I have two poems which are obviously mythological – "The Song for Duryadhana" and "Vishma Waiting for his Death". I have also a poem on a character who is a witness to all that happened in the *Mahabharata* war.

**MB** What is your view on the present state of Indian Writing in English?

**BP** The older poets are still writing. There have been quite a few younger poets who have been writing well. Among them are Sudeep Sen, Ravindra Swain, Shanta Acharya, Sambit Panigrahi, Sutapa Chaudhuri, Amanita Sen, Gopi Krishnan Kattoor, T. R. Joy, Pravanjan Mishra, Rabin Ngomngong, Mamang Dai, Desmond Leslie Kharmawphlang and Sharmila Roy.

**MB** Do you think that criticism is an integral part of literary appreciation?

**BP** Of course I do. Every good poet looks forward to a frank criticism of his work. It is from criticism that the poet learns about his mistakes and limitations. Not many articles have been written on my poetry but those few which have been written have been quite reassuring. Poetry and criticism are two sides of a coin. The poet needs critics just as a critic needs poets. A book review is the first critical work on a poet's book. Hence, they are necessary elements in the growth of a poet.

**MB** How are your Oriya poems different from the English ones?

**BP** I think the only difference is that I dictate my Oriya poems to my wife because I have forgotten the Oriya script. Sometimes I take a particular theme and write on it both in Oriya and in English. I suppose my Oriya poems are simpler and more lyrical than my English poems.

**MB** How do you write a poem?

**BP** I wait for a poem to come. Perhaps wait for a title. At some other time the first or the last line. The first line stays with me for a week or so and then it asks me to put itself down on the page. Earlier I used to write my poems in long hand, but now I write it on the computer. Right now I have a title for a poem as well as its first two lines. I think, when I sit down to write, the rest of the poem will follow.

**MB** Have you written anything other than poetry?

**BP** Yes, I've written a book on D. H. Lawrence and a reference book on Indian Philosophy and Religion. Besides, I have published several articles which have been published in good journals. I have published a novel called *Absences*. These days, however, I am not writing prose.

**MB** Your poetic style is referred to as "rooted in his (your) soul", will you please elucidate?

**BP** This is a difficult question. One of my American poet friends, Tess Gallagher, once wrote that poetry is nothing but a process of "soul making" in her preface of my first book, *Going to the Temple*. I think every good poet is inspired by his soul. However, the soul is always related to the body. The body is important too.

**Mahuya Bhaumik** is associate professor at the Department of English, Derozio Memorial College (Kolkata). She has presented papers in various national and international conferences and seminars and has published in different international journals. Her areas of interest include Indian English Writing, Culture Studies, Diasporic Literature, Film Studies and Dalit Literature. She has recently published in *CLEaR* and *Writers in Conversation*.  
[mahuarc@yahoo.com](mailto:mahuarc@yahoo.com)