

Hari Mohan Jha is one of the most distinguished and popular writers in modern Maithili literature and has become almost a household name for the Maithili speaking people. It is justified by his enormous contribution and experiments in narratology which has enriched Maithili literature. To him goes the credit of elevating Maithili prose and bringing it at par with poetry in grace and grandeur. His sparkling wit and bright irony has left an indelible mark on the history of Maithili Literature.

Hari Mohan Jha took to writing when he was barely out of his teens, and has to his credit over 20 books which include novels, short stories, plays, reminiscences, besides erudite works on philosophy. He was a regular contributor to a number of research journals and was associated with many educational institutions. He was a member of the Scientific and Technical Terminology Commission. His autobiographical work *Jeevan Yatra* won him the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1985.

Shailendra Mohan Jha (b. 1929—d. 1994) was a scholar of wide learning. He began his career as a lecturer in Hindi at Tata College, Charbasa and retired as Professor and Head, Deptt. of Maithili at Mithila University. He has published some 15 books including novels, books on criticism, essays, children's literature and so on. He has also edited *Allava*, a literary magazine.



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# Hari Mohan Jha

Shailendra Mohan Jha

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**Hari Mohan Jha**

The sculpture reproduced on the endpaper depicts a scene where three soothsayers are interpreting to King Suddhodana the dream of Queen Maya, mother of Lord Buddha. Below them is seated a scribe recording the interpretation. This is perhaps the earliest available pictorial record of the art of writing in India.

From Nagarjunakonda, 2nd century A.D.

Courtesy : National Museum, New Delhi.

MAKERS OF INDIAN LITERATURE

Hari Mohan Jha

Shailendra Mohan Jha



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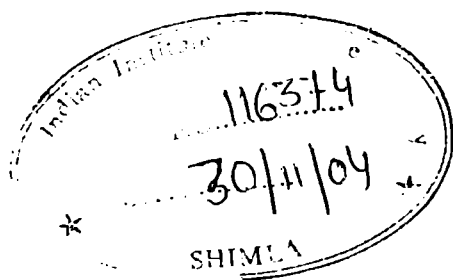
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## Preface

HARI MOHAN JHA, one of the most distinguished and popular writers in modern Maithili literature has become almost a household name for the Maithil-speaking people. It is so justified not only by his enormous literary output and experiments in narratology but also by the indelible mark he has left on the younger generation of writers. He enriched the Maithili language in more ways than one. He gave a fillip to Maithili prose by bringing it at par with poetry in grace and grandeur. His sparkling repartee, bright irony, and lasting wit enliven our day to day conversation. The names of many of his characters have gained currency as common nouns, several of his phrases and witticism have acquired proverbial dimensions. In spite of his inimitable style he still remains a living model for the posterity. The present monograph is a humble effort to link the biographical and literary aspects of the writer by tracing how certain seminal experiences of life found expression in his powerful stories, and thereby to evaluate his contribution.

I would like to thank Dr A.K. Jha of the Department of English, University of Bihar, Muzaffarpur, Dr Ramdev Jha of the Department of Maithili, L.N. Mithila University, Darbhanga, Prof. G.N. Chaudhary and Dr A.K. Jha, both of the Department of English, C.M. College, Darbhanga for their kind cooperation in preparing the manuscript. I benefited in good measure from their comments and suggestions. I also acknowledge my sincere gratitude to all whose textual observations have been incorporated in the book. If the book is appreciated by the readers, I would feel rewarded.

Bengali Tola,  
Laheriasarai (Darbhanga)  
18.10.91

**Shailendra Mohan Jha**





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*In memory of  
my mother-in-law  
Subhadra Devi,  
wife of  
Hari Mohan Jha*

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# Introduction

HARI MOHAN JHA is considered the foremost creative writer in modern Maithili literature. He is often equated to Vidyapati, the celebrated medieval Maithili poet. It is firmly acclaimed that the land of Mithila can produce a Vidyapati even in the realm of prose. Vidyapati is credited as being the earliest singer of eastern India to have raised a vernacular to language of literature. Although a man of Sanskrit, he appreciated the importance of the vernacular and through his songs, used it with utmost skill and perfection. Likewise modern Maithili prose owes a lot to Hari Mohan Jha, who made it a vehicle of literary pursuit, adopting the spoken Maithili free from archaism with which it was seized in its formative stage. He had an extraordinary talent for narrative prose and used prose fiction as his medium of expression developing it into a veritable art. The choice was quite in consonance with the general demand for prose in the modern age. The large number of translations of his works in most of the Indian languages confirm that like Vidyapati his popularity has not remained confined to his own language only but has stretched out far beyond.

Hari Mohan Jha was born at a time when Mithila, the land of Maithili speaking people, was passing through a transition, a period of awakening—social, intellectual, as well as political. It was a period when yearning for new literature influenced by Western thought was attracting every young mind. In Mithila, English education, which was the prime channel for Western influence, had started gaining ground. Yet the distrust and suspicion for the new system persisted. It had been a subject of controversy for nearly a hundred years, as it had been a home of traditional learning. People here were in favour of Sanskrit education. They were almost reluctant to accept the new

curriculum, considering it detrimental to their old culture. For this very standpoint, when in Bengal, as early as 1823 Raja Ram Mohan Roy and others were protesting against the Sanskrit system of education as at "best a calculated attempt to keep the country in darkness",<sup>1</sup> in Mithila, efforts were being made to establish Sanskrit colleges, with the sole aim: "to keep green the memory of the days that are no more, of the certainties that lay buried in oblivion, to revive Sanskrit learning that lives up to this day like the fossil records of the wisdom of the ancients."

This kept the region far behind Bengal where the new educational system had been accepted much earlier and through it the Western influence had opened new perspectives in social behaviour and literary activities. However, in due course, all prejudices against English education started wearing off. People were reconciled and the new curriculum of education spread and through it the Western thought prevailed, promoting in its wake a more liberal and enlightened system of education. The impact of something modern though alien was quite discernible now. A tension of conflict between the old ideals and the new ideas, the native and the exotic was building up in every rational mind. Ultimately it culminated into a social upheaval, striking at the very root of parochialism, ignorance, superstition and other evils that had sapped the life-blood of the society.

However, though the region never witnessed any social movement like the Brahmo Samaj Movement in Bengal or the Arya Samaj Movement in Western India, nor did it produce any spiritual leader like Ramkrishna Paramhansa, who had the capacity of giving a new direction to the masses, quite in-tune with the upto-date values. Still the creative writings produced under the impact of Western thought, particularly in neighbouring Bengal, had started influencing the intellectuals of the region in accelerating the pace through their own language. It prompted a rediscovery of their ancient heritage, promoting a national culture and stimulated social changes.

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<sup>1</sup> *Chanda Jha*, Jaideva Mishra, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, p. 57.

Until the end of the 19th century, Maithili language was a language of feeling, not one of thought. The literature being produced was predominantly lyrical and meant to be sung. Music and poetry were so infused that the eminence of music was regarded to be the elevation of poetry. Vidyapati's glory rested mainly on his lyrical quality. He was appreciated and honoured in the extreme. He used to be imitated and followed to such an extent that he became the only ideal for literary pursuit, and his lyric-form became the only means of creative aptitude. However, though Vidyapati upheld the literary tradition in Maithili it was not well enough for its all-round improvement. In the long run the post-Vidyapati Maithili literature turned out to be stagnant and unproductive. Maithili poets generally did not take advantage of the variety of verse-forms and were content, instead, with writing in a hackneyed, ornate and artificial style within the ambit of devotional and erotic songs. Their metrical monotony and lack of objective and intellectual treatment persisted as an unfortunate legacy. The old adage that songs mar the poetry proved almost true in the case of Maithili literature. Up to the beginning of the present century we find the whole stock constrained to a limited range of wavelength; totally confined to a contracted scope of theme and showing signs of decadence.

It may be noted here that innovations in literature could come only after the mind was impregnated with new ideas. Chanda Jha was the first Maithili writer who stood up to free the literary spirit. That ultimately expanded the horizon of Maithili enabling it accept various forms and facts which were contemporary and graceful. He, too, was predominantly a lyric poet, but a man of wider vision. At a time when other vernaculars were taking great strides for their all-round development, responding to western influence, mainly through English education, he could not bear to see his own language still languishing in the darkness isolated by its native medievalism. Although he himself had grown up in ancient lifestyle, without English education, he was receptive to new thoughts and ideas. He kept himself in touch with contemporary movement. While other poets were still following the beaten track, he struck out a new path by writing on matters of social and human concern. He remained totally concerned with



the uplift of literature. He took initiative and enterprise, strove hard to furnish it with substance, variety, intellectuality and modernity. In the process he introduced prose, as Maithili had no prose worth the name.

It is prose which is adequate enough to the expression of nuances of thought, and not the verse which usually suits as a tool of emotions and intuitions. Prose was the most significant contribution of Chanda Jha. It heralded the new age in Maithili literature. His prose was however mere translation work—translation of the *Purush Pariksha* (Test of Man) by Vidyapati. As Prof Jaideva Mishra has observed: "it is chaotic in form with more or less a tendency to substitute, whenever possible, one Sanskrit word in the original by another word in Maithili, little caring as to what shape the sentence would finally take, but all the same an attempt worthwhile, considering the fact that it was the first major attempt in this direction."<sup>1</sup> It was an innovation in the practical sense as it inspired a host of other writers to take up prose to utilise their creativeness. It was during this time, in the first decade of the 20th century, that periodicals and adaptations from Sanskrit sources made their appearance. The latter were primarily incidents from the great epics and stories from the Puranas. Essays on a variety of topics were also being written. It is remarkable that all these writers, like Chanda Jha, were men of Sanskrit, having no touch with English, but all were inspired indirectly by the spirit of the age, were conscious enough about their mother-tongue lagging far behind other vernaculars in its run for development. However, these compositions were not an evidence of spontaneous growth from the natural language of the people. Instead, they are artificial coinage laden with verballity based on classical terms, limited rhythms, intermingled clauses and jingling alliterations creating as though fantasy. The prose style clumsy, pedantic and highly inefficient as a communicant of common man's sensibilities. There was no element of modernity about it. There was an absolute need "to relieve it of its classical coat of armour, to make it modern, and to give it the

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1 Jaideva Mishra, *Chanda Jha*, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, p. 27.

naturalness and flexibility of the spoken language",<sup>1</sup> and that became possible when more and more creative writings appeared. The progress remained slow but gradual. It was only when men with progressive and modern ideas came in the fray that it picked up momentum.

These new entrants, with a background of English education, saw the importance of Maithili, the language of the land, with a novel viewpoint. They used it as an appropriate vehicle of modern thought and knowledge. Every effort was made to free the literature from its state of arrested development. In the process, its scope expanded and it was brought into a closer contact with the secular, scientific and progressive outlook on life gaining ground in India at that time.

It is against this background that we have to estimate Hari Mohan Jha's contribution towards Maithili literature. He was one of the few English educated young men who seized the opportunity and adopted Maithili for their literary pursuits. Ever since his maiden venture *Kanyadan* (Giving away of the daughter in marriage) appeared in *Mithila*, a leading literary journal of the time, that the Maithili readers took to him instantly. When *Kanyadan* came out in book form, it raised him to an even higher level. The book almost unleashed a revolution in Maithili literature. It was a significant debut for one who did not have any literary apprenticeship.

In this respect one is reminded of Saratchandra, the great Bengali novelist, who once said about himself that in Bengal he was the only fortunate writer who did not have to struggle. Indeed he became popular with his very first work. Hari Mohan Jha had no occasion to say so, but in fact he is perhaps the only Maithili writer who did not have to struggle. He reached the pinnacle of popularity and firmly established himself as a writer with the publication of *Kanyadan*. He remains unrivalled in Maithili literary history even today.

Literary affinity was a legacy which Hari Mohan Jha got from his father Janardan Jha, better known by his pen-name 'Jansidan'.

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1 J.C. Ghose, *Bengali Literature* (Oxford, 1948), p. 120.

He was a renowned scholar and a poet of repute of his time. He had equal access to the literary circles of both Hindi and Maithili. The credit for writing the first novel in Maithili goes to him. 'Jansidan' was a crusader against social anomalies prevalent in his times. They are, in fact, the ingredients on which his novels are based. Before taking to novel writing, he had translated a number of novels from Bengali into Hindi. Bengali novelists had written many novel concerning social evils for which they were primarily inspired by the Brahmo Samaj Movement. While translating these novels, 'Jansidan' might have felt he need to write something similar in his own language in which this genre till then did not exist. Many of the evil customs prevailing then in Mithilia, such as polygamy and mis-matched marriages, were sanctified by religion. All these evil customs were hotly debated and discussed during those days, offered ready-made theme for most of his novels. *Nirdayi Sasu* (The Cruel Mother-in-law) followed by *Shashikala* (1915) were serialised in *Mithila Mihir*, while *Punarvivah* (Marrying Second Time - 1926) manifest his inventive power and skill. Hari Mohan Jha, therefore, had the distinct opportunity to acquire the talent from his father, and he stepped into the field and "made novel writing a paying vocation and raised it to an artistic level".<sup>1</sup>

Hari Mohan Jha's literary career in Maithili, spans more than fifty years. It covers two novels, a sizable bunch of short stories and miscellaneous prose, several one-act plays, reminiscences, rambles, skits and life-sketches, as well as poems and parodies. After the publication of *Kanyadan*, his readers and admirers clamoured for a sequel and ultimately *Dwiragaman* appeared (1943). In subsequent years came out, *Pranamya Devata* (1945), *Khattar Kaka-Ka Tarang* (1948), *Rangshala* (1949) and *Charchari* (1960). Hereafter, though no book was published by him for a long time, his writing regularly appeared in journals and periodicals. The last book which he wrote was his autobiography, *Jivan Yatra* (Life's Journey) published posthumously in 1984. It won him the Sahitya Akademy Award in 1985. Each of Jha's books was applauded

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<sup>1</sup> Jaikantha Mishra, *History of Muithili Literature* (Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi), p. 237.

and received by the general readers with the same eagerness and warmth as his last work. His name, now became more or less, synonymous with modern Maithili literature.

What were the factors which made Hari Mohan Jha so popular? Why was he so easily accepted by his readers? It is pertinent to raise such questions and the clue to all these to a large extent, lies in his attitude towards literature. He never considered literature a mental luxury and a matter of word-play. He was convinced that literature had a profound social role to play and it would remain significant only if it zealously guarded its relevance to life. Hari Mohan Jha is in his happiest self when he writes about life around him. His entire literature faithfully reflects the variegated social scene with all its surroundings. He took his themes from rural Mithila of which he had intimate knowledge and experience.

At the time when he was writing, he was fully conscious of the degeneration gnawing into the vitals of Maithili social structure. He inexorably identified himself with the scientific temper of the age. Thereby, he mounted a scathing attack on the hypocrisy prevalent in society manifest in all spiritual and moral evils, and religious arrogance. It was like a clarion call to the up-and-coming generation, inspiring the whole lot of them to set up a new social order in consonance with the spirit of the age. Without ever assuming the role of a preacher or preceptor, he relentlessly fought against the social conservatives. By his witty polemics he was successful in bringing about attitudinal changes in the younger generation. It was in this vein he had taken up the cause of the emancipation of women and female education.

Owing to Hari Mohan Jha's tirade against many irrational religious practices, he was often accused of being an atheist. He was also decried for propagating western civilization in the name of modernity and progress and was railed for deriding many traditional customs. But Jha was bold enough to negate the allegations outright and to emphasize that the degradation in the socio-religious life was the result of misinterpretation of the formal religious practices as enshrined in our scriptures. In the preface to his collection of satirical sketches, *Pranamya Devata*, he loudly

declares that "when no licence is required to compose a poem in a particular metre and a stanza can be put to use in the name of scriptures, it is the bounden duty of a scholar to discriminate between truth and falsehood." With this aim in view he did not hesitate to point out how certain social evils were corroding our society and crippling its growth. He vigorously argued that "neither antiquity is an evidence of propriety, not mere modernity a manifestation of authenticity. One has to exact the essential truth from both." As such, he never intended to say that one should completely cut oneself off from the past for the sake of present values. Instead, he pleaded for a synthesis of the best that was inherent in both. The only way to resurrect the society was through an adequate understanding and appreciation of the innate values of our culture on the backdrop of the present. This basic idea was the central motive behind his entire literature.

Even while admitting the unprecedented popularity of Hari Mohan Jha, it is often murmured that he remained confined to a limited sphere ignoring trends of thought that were taking shape in different Indian literatures. He was born at a time when feudalism under the British rule was at its climax. The exploitation of the proletariat, the intelligentsia and others by the rich was rampant. However, in reaction to foreign rule and feudalism, struggle for freedom had started taking shape. Urge for freedom and equality finds a glorious expression in Bankimchandra's novels which ushered renaissance in Bengali literature. He had numerous followers who too were airing their views for the country's liberation. They were being guided by the views of Swami Vivekanand who "with all his religious fervour never forgot for a moment that neither social reform nor spiritual uplift is possible without freedom from foreign yoke." Gurudev Rabindranath founded the Viswa-Bharati in its sylvan setting with the vision of total education for those who would have the courage and care to serve the nation. Moreover, the great Russian Revolution had heralded a new era in the life of the working classes all over the world and its message was being spread through literature. This background of the world scene had enhanced the responsibility of Hari Mohan Jha.

Though Hari Mohan Jha was initially inspired into novel writing by his father, he was equally influenced by the Bengali writers of his times—like Bankimchandra, Rabindranath and Saratchandra. The social problems in Mithila were more or less identical and no doubt these writers had an enormous ingenuity in projecting the problems through their crafts.

In a way, Hari Mohan too succeeded, maybe in a smaller scale, in creating a consciousness among the educated in respect of certain social injustices—in particular, the huge injustice meted out to women. However, some of his critics complain that the ruralities remained only a tool to be ridiculed instead of gaining sympathy from him.

Such accusations against Hari Mohan Jha are not however well-founded. He was a man of unsurpassed comic genius. He had his own mode of introducing his subject matter. The characteristic that allured his readers, so to speak, is his dominant humour. Humour has certainly more competence to attract, specially when it is served in the form of clever narrative in witty language. Jha had the talent to create such outlets and his perception for laughter finds unfettered expression everywhere. This is an inevitable outcome of the writer's special capacity for plotting situations which would arouse laughter. In his autobiography the writer says, God, the supreme playwright, had assigned him the role of a comedian and he was always conscious of his role. The social milieu offered him requisite materials for this purpose. The characters he portrayed and around whose oddities he wove the texture of his comedy invariably stand out as creatures of the social surroundings in which they lived and worked. He held a mirror to them as though, and they found reflection of their own faces with all odd lineaments. He had few prejudices and even fewer inhibitions. The fun he poked at his comic characters was meant to correct them rather than to derive malicious pleasure. While taking note of the humour generated by Hari Mohan Jha, one would find it pungent and full of satirical overtones. This might be called an outcome of wit which originates in a sense of superiority, rather than sympathy, and derives its power from verbal artistry. While creating humour and casting satire full of witty remarks and repartees, he exalts his readers. His appeal

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gradually overreached the circle of intelligentsia and he enjoyed readership among people who had very little education. Hari Mohan Jha spared nothing. However, there is a sweetness in his works which 'tickles even when it hurts'. Gradually his works became popular with the intelligentsia and the common reader alike. What is perceived as ridiculous is a result of exaggeration and exaggeration is not always a blemish but an art. To quote S.N. Sen Gupta's comment on exaggeration in Saratchandra's stories: "Exaggeration, we must remember is an essence of art, there being as much exaggeration in *King Lear* as in *Picwick Papers*. Only exaggeration, to be artistic, must observe the fundamental law that a character in fiction must be as full of vitality as a character in reality. It can be convincing if only he has that unity in variety which is the hallmark of life." And, there is no doubt that Hari Mohan Jha fulfils this criterion. In spite of obvious exaggeration, he has maintained a balance between 'consistency and unexpectedness'.

## Life Sketch

HARI MOHAN JHA was born at Kumar Bajitpur village of district Vaishali in Bihar, on 18 September, 1908. It was on the auspicious day of *Jimootvahan Vrata*.<sup>1</sup> It was also a wonderful day for his parents as they were blessed with their first son after two daughters. Hari Mohan Jha's father, Pandit Janardan Jha was a renowned scholar, poet and writer of his times. Although an orthodox Brahmin, his attitude to life and social problems was imbued to a certain extent with liberal thinking that inclined toward reason and progressiveness. Hari Mohan Jha imbibed this from his father and exhibited the same in his life and letters.

Hari Mohan Jha's father had shifted to this village, leaving his ancestral home at Virsayar, a village in Madhubani district of Bihar. Almost an orphan, having lost his father in early boyhood, he came to live with his maternal grandfather, Chandramani Kumar who was a scion of the Oinwar dynasty<sup>2</sup> which ruled over Mithila in the medieval period. Hari Mohan Jha, thus, shared a distinguished lineage.

His mother Janani Devi was the daughter of a Sanskrit scholar, Raja Shiva Singh, known for his poetry and philanthropy. She

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<sup>1</sup> A ritualistic fast the Hindu mothers keep, for the welfare of their children.

<sup>2</sup> Raja Shiva Singh of this dynasty is well-known as a warrior who fought many battles. He was also a sincere lover of music and poetry and was instrumental in promoting creative geniuses of his land. It is during his tenure the vernacular found its due recognition as a literary medium. He patronised the great poet Vidyapati when he wrote his immortal songs.



was a well-read woman who could recite considerable portions from the old texts from memory. With her strong sense of right and wrong, and an elevated standard of values, she played a pivotal role in the formative stage of her son's life.

Hari Mohan Jha spent his childhood under the tutelage of his father. He accompanied him from place to place in the course of his job. Even before the boy was five years old his father started giving him lessons in Sanskrit grammar and prosody. The boy seemed to have acquired enough of his poet-father's natural talent for poetry quite early in life. He could recite a large number of *slokas* and could play with puns and alliterations with ease. When at the age of nine, he composed a hymn for his maternal grandfather; the old man was so amazed that he went around the whole village telling about the extraordinary poetic talent of his grandson. While at Darbhanga, where his father worked for a time as an editor of *Mithila Mihir*, he would regularly go to the office with his father and rummage through files of different papers and magazines. He was a regular visitor to Luxmishwar Public Library of the place, where he read the novels of Bankimchandra, Rabindranath and Saratchandra besides works of G.P. Srivastav, Deokinandan Khatri and others. Inspired by G.P. Srivastav's humorous story *Lumbi Darhi* (Long Beard) he himself wrote an amusing tale *Azib Bandar* (Wonderful Monkey) when he was just twelve years old. The story was so much liked by Jagdishwar Prasad Ojha, an assistant in his father's office, that he got it published from Sudarshan Press of Darbhanga. All these were instrumental in moulding his literary talent. A large number of poets and writers used to come to see his father and he relished their literary talks. Thus what he learnt from gentle communion in his early days became an inspiration for him in the years to come.

From Darbhanga he frequently visited Chanaur, a village not far away, where his sister was married and where he stayed for long stretches of time. The rural close-ups which are so intimately portrayed in his writings are based to a large extent on this particular village situated in the heartland of Mithila.

Hari Mohan Jha's formal education started very late. At the age of fifteen he appeared for an oral examination at G.B.B.

Collegiate School, Muzaffarpur and was selected for admission to Class X. At school he was found to be studious and intelligent. He appeared for the Matriculation examination in 1925 and passed in the first division and secured a scholarship.

Hari Mohan Jha joined G.B.B. College (now L.S. College) at Muzaffarpur, for Intermediate courses. He proved himself a serious student and passed the I.A. examination in 1927 in the first division, topping the list of successful candidates of the then Patna University, which had its jurisdiction all over Bihar including Orissa. For his graduation he shifted to Patna and got himself admitted to Patna College. There he led a fervent intellectual life. He read extensively and attended lectures delivered by eminent scholars from time to time. A brilliant student, he had once given a pleasant surprise to his Sanskrit teacher Pt. Dev Dutta Tripathi, by answering all his Sanskrit questions at the Intermediate examination in verse. When Pt. Tripathi came to know that it was no other than Hari Mohan Jha he asked him to compose a verse impromptu, which he humbly complied.

While at college he used to take keen interest in extracurricular activities and actively participated in debates and elocution contests. He had also the privilege to represent his university in other universities too. He was a boarder of the Minto Hostel of Patna College, and was one of the most popular students in the campus. His popularity rested not only on his academic brilliance but also on his talent as one of the wittiest poet among his fellow students. He could compose a few lines of humorous verse for any occasion off hand and make others burst into laughter with his witty remarks full of verbal delicacies. He graduated in 1929 with Honours in English.

After graduation, he had to discontinue his studies for a year owing to the adverse financial position of his family. His father had retired and had permanently settled at his village home. He was also not keeping good health. In such a situation he was not in a position to get himself enrolled for post-graduate studies. However, he found a way out. He came in contact with the famous publishing house, Pustak Bhandar, Laheriasarai (Darbhanga) and secured some gainful assignments. This

publishing house was the hub of Bihar's literary activities at that time. many eminent writers of the day were associated with it. The proprietor was an old friend of his father and had published many of his books. He was warmly received by Pustak Bhandar for which he wrote useful textbooks which later became extremely popular. In this way he earned some money. Later he returned to Patna and got himself admitted.

He took up Philosophy, a favourite subject of his. He had the privilege to become a pupil—and one of the oldest pupils—of the great philosopher Dr D. M. Dutta, a name commanding universal respect in academic circles. In 1932, he passed his M. A. and stood first class first and was awarded a gold medal. His love for the subject can be said to have helped a lot in developing in him a logical and critical mind.

In 1933 Hari Mohan Jha was appointed a lecturer at B.N. College, Patna. Later he joined Patna College as an Assistant Professor in the subject and finally came to the post-graduate department of Philosophy of Patna University, where he served as a Professor and Head for a long period. He earned quite a name as a good teacher specially as one who was competent in attracting students to his subject.

He wrote books and articles on philosophical topics with a marvellous knack of simplifying the intricacies by thread-bare analysis of the subject. This love for lucidity and clarity of expression is reflected everywhere as a distinctive feature in his writings. He remained actively associated with different philosophical organisations and presided over the All India Philosophical Congress at its Allahabad session in 1974.

After retirement from service in 1972, he was assigned by the U. G. C. to write a book on the "Trends of Linguistic Analysis in Indian Philosophy" and the book when published was highly acclaimed by scholars. Throughout the long period of his active life, he also remained devoted to Maithili literature using it as the main channel of his creative genius and effected a literary renaissance.

Hari Mohan Jha was married at the age of sixteen only, to a bride of twelve. It happened just after passing his Matriculation examination. Early marriages were quite prevalent in those days. The bride, Subhadra, was a school-going girl but her education was discontinued after their marriage. The idea was that if a girl had learnt cooking and other household chores, there was no need to give her any formal education. It was enough if she had learnt the alphabet and could write a letter. Later a champion of the cause of female education, Hari Mohan Jha had to remain content with the marriage and in due course his wife, moulded herself as a wife worthy of a literary giant. Once deprived of school education she was now a self-taught and a well-educated lady. She proved herself an affectionate companion of her husband and pre-deceased him in 1982 leaving him sad and lonely. The couple had a daughter and four sons.

Hari Mohan Jha's contribution to Maithili language consists mainly of *belles lettres*. During his stay at Laheriasarai after graduation, he got deeply attached to the language. In the preliminary stage he wrote a few articles for *Mithila*.<sup>3</sup> It was in this journal that his novel *Kanyadan* was first serialised. It was his first major contribution to literature. It was a marvellous achievement for a debutant catapulting him into overnight fame. His attachment to his mother-tongue gradually deepened with time and he kept enriching it till the end of his life. All his works turned out to be best-sellers and his readers always looked for something new from his pen.

He was the first among Maithili writers to portray the social life of rural Mithila and to look at it with a fresh approach. He also bears the credit of introducing realism in Maithili literature, without discarding idealism or the old values inherent in the contemporary set-up. His genius had its sound and stubborn roots in real life. In his view, life and literature were inseparable and at the same time complementary to each other. A prolific writer, there was no genre he did not try his hands at and accomplish equal fame. Maithili prose got a new glow and style at his hands. He

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<sup>3</sup> *Mithila* is a literary journal sponsored by the aforesaid Pustak Bhandar.

forged a colloquial prose style whose dominating elements were reason and rationality. The distinctiveness of such a style and thought is evident in every form of literature he experimented with.

However, Hari Mohan Jha will be best remembered for his humour, which was the warp and woof of his entire creativity. As a person too, he was jovial and full of mirth. His friends and admirers would collect at his place in order to enjoy his witty talks and anecdotes. Though a teacher of an arid subject like philosophy, he was gifted with an innate sense of humour. He was witty to the core and well adept in the craft of satire. His keen perception of inconsistencies and anomalies in the social life around him provoked the satirist in him. But he was neither malicious nor vitriolic, for he knew how to spice his satire with wit and humour.

He used sarcasm and satire as weapons for social reforms and proved successful at it. But it was his sheer humility, that he never strived to take any credit for spearheading such an immense mass awakening. He always looked at himself as a comedian whose role it was to amuse and entertain his readers. As he asserts himself: "When I look back on my life, it presents itself like a drama; the supreme playwright seems to have assigned me the role of a comedian. Some scenes have still to be acted out before the final curtain falls."

After the sad demise of his wife, he had moved to Laheriasarai to spend his last years with his daughter and two sons, who were living there. In his last days he was very much desolate and despondent. The shock of the death of his wife was too severe for him. Earlier he had also borne the tragic end of his only grandson. The train of his life which earlier seemed to be running on two rails of wit and humour now suddenly seemed to be gliding on the monorail of pathos. During these days he wrote some sad pieces reflecting 'the weariness, the fever, and the fret' of life. It was in this state of mind that he left for his heavenly abode. The final curtain fell on his life on 23 February 1984. He was cremated at Simariaghat on the bank of Ganga, not far away from Chaumath Ghat where the funeral pyre of the great poet Vidyapati had been lit.

A simple man, Hari Mohan led an unpretentious life. Whatever he wrote, he had the flavour of intellectual freedom and mental emancipation. His popularity with his readers was enormous. Even those who were critical of his viewpoints could not resist their temptation to go through his writings. He was adored and applauded all through his life. Cultural and literary organisations like Chetana Samiti, Maithili and Rashtrabhasha Parishad,—from Patna and from other places—had honoured him on several occasions. The Sankalpa Lok of Laheriasarai had conferred upon him the title of *Mithila Bibhuti* for his life-long dedication to Maithili language. The Maithil Goshthi of Patna had presented him a felicitation volume on his 75th birth anniversary in 1983.

## Novels

HARI MOHAN JHA has written two novels, *Kanyadan* and *Dwiragaman*, its sequel. The former had only just been serialised in *Mithila*, and only three chapters of it were published in its second, third and sixth issues when it generated so much interest among Maithili readers that they clamoured for the subsequent parts. The publisher's were flooded with letters in this connection. So after his M. A. examination in 1932, the writer came to Laheriasarai at the behest of the publisher's and wrote the remaining chapters, which later came out in the book form in 1933. Earlier, in the first issue of *Mithila*, he had written an article on the state of female education of the time forcefully advocating the case. This concern of the writer of the sorry state of female education later unfolded itself in the form of his novel *Kanyadan*. The society at that time was not in favour of educating girls. On the other hand, the advent of the British rule was popularising a new education system which was gaining ground among boys. This led to a cleavage in intellectual attainments causing tensions in the married life of the young couples. The plot of *Kanyadan* centres round this anomaly. The very dedication of the book to the bigwigs of the Maithil Brahmin society is comic in as much as it seeks to expose their callous negligence of the girls' education.

Although a social comedy, the book is mingled with pathos. It highlights the terrible outcome of a marriage between an uneducated village girl Buchchi Dai of immature age and C. C. Mishra a graduate with liberal Western outlook. Before the marriage C. C. Mishra lays down the condition with Revati Raman, the main initiator of the proposal, that the bride must be educated,

who would be his life-long companion for him and who must be able to assist him in all walks of life, understand his ideas and reciprocate to sentiments and, of course, must share his interests, ambitions and activities. "I can never tolerate an ignorant, superstitious baby bride shut up in *zenana* and unfit for all practical purposes. I must have a forward, up-to-date, well accomplished lady who will not only satisfy my physical cravings, but also meet me on equal terms in intellectual, aesthetic and practical matters of life." Revati Raman assures him that he would not find any reason for complaint after marriage. The part where Revati Raman and his wife dupe C. C. Mishra with confusing and evasive answers regarding the mental and physical attributes of the proposed bride is one of the most interesting portions in the book. They manage to trick C. C. Mishra and the marriage is solemnised. But in the night of *chaturthi*, the customary fourth night's ceremony, when the bride is introduced to the husband, C. C. Mishra well realises that he has been duped. Waiting in the *Kobar ghar*, the nuptial chamber, for his dream bride, he finds a dumb doll covered in veil. He had never imagined that a newlywed bride could be so cold and unresponsive. At a slight prodding from him when she behaves in the most unsavoury manner, his dreams are shattered. It becomes impossible for him to stay there even for a moment. In such a perplexed state of mind he thinks of leaving the place as quickly as possible. He writes a long letter to Revati Raman, now his brother-in-law, describing his agony for being cheated so mercilessly. He leaves the letter there and paces up and down in the room looking for a way to get out, when the author, shedding off his role of an objective narrator, gets impatient to apprise the girl of the calamity that has befallen her. In his vision she is only an innocent and immature child who must perforce bear the consequences of being an uneducated child bride. Chiding her for being careless he says: "O unfortunate girl! what pleasure did you get of this first meeting? You are inviting your disaster and yet keeping a veil over your face? Just open your eyes and see what you are losing. At the moment be cautious since the opportunity is slipping out from your hands. Even now, if you go and plead to him, he would not dare to discard you. But you have put on blinkers over your eyes."



This is one of the few instances in the book which is really touching. But Buchchi Dai is quite unmindful of her plight. The door is bolted from outside and there is a window with broken bars in the back wall. C. C. Mishra has escaped through it unmindful of the rain and darkness. The inmates of the house could know about the incident only in the morning when a hue and cry is raised. When finally it calms down and all have left, Lal Kaki, the bride's mother comes to her daughter and clasps her in her arms. Buchchi Dai breaks down and immediately hides her face in her mother's bosom. Tears burst forth from within her. It is now that she realises the loss she has sustained. The novel comes to an end on this plaintive note with the writer heavily underlining the need and importance of female education if such tragedies are to be averted.

His second novel *Dwiragaman* too is truly a sequel to the first. It was produced at the behest of his friends and admirers who were eager to see the deserted wife finally accepted by her husband. By this time C. C. Mishra reconciles to his fate and according to his wishes it had been arranged to impart informal education to Buchchi Dai to make her a befitting wife. Private coaching and lessons in manners and etiquettes fit for educated society, contribute to an all-round development of her personality. C. C. Mishra has now no reason not to accept her as his wife. Ultimately he consents to *dwiragaman*, a matrimonial ceremony of the bride's departure from her paternal home to step into the domesticities in the household of her husband. Since *Kanyadan* only raised a problem and did not solve it, was not unnatural that the writer would come out with a solution in its sequel. But he has made no such attempt and rather he appears to have wishfully ignored it. The plot of *Dwiragaman* barely deals with the consolidation of a tryst, and the novel has a happy ending.

However, the novel lacks the natural flow of *Kanyadan* and reflects the constraint in manipulating the plot for a pre-ordained conclusion. Though there are improbabilities and far-fetched coincidences and sometimes even melodramatic situations yet

these do not mar the human interest of the story. The structure of both the novels is closely-knit and compact, and together they may be treated as one harmonious whole. *Kanyadan* was written primarily to promote female education, but its relevance may be doubted now when education among the women is fast growing. Even if *Kanyadan* were not written this process of growth would still have continued among Maithili society because it was the demand of the time. The conflict between the old ideals and the new ideas had virtually ended and society was gearing up to accept new values. However, its dominant role in accelerating the pace of change in this direction cannot be belittled. It had helped in educating and inspiring the mass on this issue. As the author has himself expounded, the effect of *Kanyadan* was three-fold, namely: on the mentality of the society, on the personal life of women and on Maithili writers. The writer was rightly pleased with the success of his creation because readers' response to the book was tremendous. *Kanyadan*'s contribution towards the changing social outlook and generating self-confidence among women cannot be overlooked. Moreover, the popularity of the novel had attracted a devoted following and had also inspired other writers to take up varied social themes for novel writing.

The story of *Kanyadan* and, for that matter, of *Dwiragaman* is plain but plausible. There is no complication in the plot and it has been grippingly narrated. It is a social novel depicting an incident which might have happened in the society of that time. However, its greatness does not lie so much in the voice it raised for social reform, the education of women, which the author took pride in, as in the large variety of unforgettable and memorable characters it created. C. C. Mishra, who is the hero of *Kanyadan* has been portrayed as a strong-willed young man of liberal western education who makes no discrimination between the sexes. In the society he belongs to, the wife is not only the life partner but also the better-half, giving not only physical but also intellectual company to her husband. Hence she must be intellectually as well-equipped as a man, and without education it is impossible. It is, therefore, not unnatural on the part of C. C. Mishra to show resentment.

However, this issue was completely side-tracked by a certain section of the readers, who vilified him for demanding an educated life partner. Instead of sympathising with him they even maligned him as an upstart, having tendency to undermine the indigenous culture and tradition. Except for a few instances in *Dwiragaman* one cannot find him attached to any alien culture, and that too may be taken as the normal process in the changing society.

What, however, is his fault? One might say that it is difficult to get a bride suiting to his mind-set in an educationally backward society of his time, where female education have never been the issue. How far is this excuse tenable in case of personal liking? Is it wrong for him, in the first place, to aspire for a suitable bride of his choice? Every young man fosters his own longings in life and C. C. Mishra cannot be an exception. But how far is it justified to entrap a man with C. C. Mishra's aspiration to tie him up with an illiterate rustic girl? Nobody actually cared for the possible reaction.

C. C. Mishra's great misfortune is that his readers missed the intrinsic qualities of his character. Even the novelist has failed to highlight the same and has delineated him from outside only. However, his letter to Revati Raman stands as a valuable proof of his intrinsic self. A sober and simple man, C. C. Mishra always wears *khadi* in pursuance of the spirit of *swadeshi* movement. He has not so much grudge against Buchchi Dai in person, as he has against her parents who had shirked their duty, that of imparting education to their daughter. His reaction is quite natural and, at the first instance when he first discovers that he has been cheated, it is so strong that he also wishes the bride to suffer for her parents' sins. However, he is not self-seeking or heartless. He makes it clear to Revati Raman that he would never marry again. He would remain a celibate and work for the emancipation of women throughout his life. He would feel it worthwhile if he could rescue a single girl from the clutches of ignorance and superstitions then prevailing. He also indicates that he has no reservation in accepting Buchchi Dai if she would make herself suitable for him.

C. C. Mishra attribute Buchchi Dai's shyness at the *Kobar ghar* to lack of education alone. He, however, does not take note of the fact that she is just a child, unable to receive him as husband. Even while showing sympathy for the girl, the writer has only sketched her character from the outside, setting her up as an epitome of rustic ignorance.

But in *Dwiragaman* one could find a great transformation in her. Now she is not only a well-educated woman quite in tune with the modern lifestyle, in which fashions and fancies sometimes touch even the heights of absurdity. It is perhaps in retaliation to her spouse's behaviour earlier. It is all the more evident when she rejects her husband's proposal to join him and insists on the *Dwiragaman* ceremony.

Among the male characters, Lal Kaka, the bride's father whose real name is something else but is known by that name probably because of his fair complexion, his brother Bholanath and his son Revati Raman alias Kantir all stand out prominent. Except Kantir, the two brothers, though not serving any significant role, are instrumental in the progress of the story. Lal Kaka is portrayed as a reasonable man, but who is apprehensive about the negotiation right from the beginning, for he knows his daughter cannot meet upto C. C. Mishra's mental outlook and social background. But he has to yield to the insistence of his reckless son who holds the view that everything would normalise once the marriage is solemnized. With this conviction he conducts the whole affair tactfully, only taking his wife into confidence and his contention for a time proves true when C. C. Mishra adopts Buchchi Dai after a temporary estrangement. Bholanath is indeed true to his name a good-natured person devoted to his elder brother.

Among other characters in the novel there is Buchhur Chaudhury, who is jealous of Lal Kaka for getting a boy like C. C. Mishra as son-in-law. His own son-in-law is an uneducated rustic youth who had also quarrelled with him for a pair of bullocks. It is quite common in village society to vie with one another's prosperity and welfare and thus the portrait of Buchkun Chaudhary is drawn from life.

Hari Mohan Jha's portraits of women characters are also remarkable. Such characters like Lal Kaki, Avesh Rani, Phuchuk Rani, Barkagamvali have left their indelible stamp on the execution of the story.

A lot has been written about Hari Mohan Jha's characters, vis a vis his novels. They have been branded as types or flat characters built around a single idea, very sketchy without much details. Contrary to this, one can find that his characters have been projected in such a manner that they appear real and familiar. They do not remain mere shadows, instead they have their self-identity reflecting contemporaneity. They appear as a sustained and subtle exploration of the human nature by the writer. While characterising he has applied the well-known method of both 'showing and telling'. Sometimes he leaves his characters free from any intervention and allows his readers to draw inference from their motives and dispositions from what they say or do. Otherwise, he intervenes and with due authority describes and evaluates the qualities of his characters himself. No attempt had been made earlier in the field of Maithili fiction to evolve the individuality of a character irrespective of events. However, there is no denying that the genius of the writer is critical rather than creative, expository rather than exploratory in the final analysis.

In *Kanyadan* the author could effect an appropriate setting for related descriptions. These descriptions are vigorous and vivid. Like flesh over a skeleton, the descriptions provide an imposing fabric on the straightforward narration of the novel. The novel opens with a conversation between Lal Kaki and Avesh Rani. They are discussing the problems in marrying off girls and other such matters. Hari Mohan has admitted somewhere that he received inspiration from a live conversation between his mother and some other women who had dropped in. "At that time, my father was much perturbed over the marriage of my younger sister. It was not getting settled anywhere. One day my mother was talking about the same with some ladies of my neighbourhood. I found Avesh Rani, Dhunmun Kaki, Dularmani Peusi (all in the novel) in that group. I relished their conversation so much that I noted it down quietly. After giving it a literary touch I sent

it for publication in *Mithila* with the caption *kanyak maiek oriaon* (preparation for daughter's marriage)." In this way *Kanyadan* was brought into existence.

On the backdrop of this the chapter has its own charm. The entire description gives interesting glimpses of domestic life in Maithil families. Even the daily round of activities in a typical Maithil household, otherwise so uneventful, has not escaped the writer's sharp attention. After a long round of talk, when night descends, Lal Kaki goes to see off Avesh Rani at the doorstep and suddenly plucks two lemons from the grove. Such minute observations give the novel a realistic touch. The novel abounds in such convincing and catching instances for which the writer creates appropriate setting to produce on the readers' mind a realistic impression of the surroundings.

At the end of this description there is a playful episode where a postal peon in uniform comes to deliver a telegram. The maid servant, Juniak Mai, was the first to see him while she was going to draw water from the well. She mistakes the man for a police constable and runs back inside the house trembling with fear. Why should a police constable come at this odd hour—she thought. But none dared to go outside to ascertain the matter. Every body in the house was in jitters. However, all heave a sigh of relief when the neighbour Jyotishiji (an astrologer by profession) came to their rescue attracted by the maid servant's shouts. It was he who received the telegram from the peon. The author has described the perplexity of the terror-struck women of the household without any malice, and ridicules their ignorance. This delineation, though sounds exaggerated, takes one to the pre-independence days, when the police in uniform was an instrument of fear and was looked down upon as impending danger.

Now the problem was to get the telegram deciphered. Jyotishiji could not do that as it was in English. There was no English-knowing person available in the village. Even Barakagamvali, who had a little education, was found incapable of reading the telegram. Yet, Jyotishiji was convinced that the telegram forebode happy tidings because it was on red paper. After a lot of

deliberation it was decided to send Jharkhandinath to Sakri, a market place few miles away, to get it deciphered by the local doctor there.

The incident forms the hilarious chapter *tar ko na parhaol gel* (How was the telegram deciphered). The whole episode is woven round Jharkhandinath, an illiterate idiotic simpleton who had never stepped out of the village earlier. He is a superb comic creation of the writer. Jharkhandinath ultimately got the telegram deciphered but forgot the message before reaching home while returning. By that time Bholanath came with the news that the marriage had been settled and Lal Kaka was coming with the bridegroom.

There are more such descriptions remarkable for their perspective scenic effect. The description of *Sabhagachi* (Sabha, held at Saurath, a village in the district of Madhubani, on a spacious ground overshadowed by trees) which was a congregation for negotiating marriage and a social institution of the region, is a nice specimen of narrative art. Again, there is a thought-provoking discussion between Revati Raman and C. C. Mishra. Lastly, there is the description of the actual marriage which presents minute details of the Brahminical rituals in an interesting way.

In *Dwiragaman*, too, there are such lively descriptions as of the speech of Miss Bijali and her discussion with C. C. Mishra, over the lunar eclipse and the village feast. All these have their importance in the development of the story. A journey, on the occasion of lunar eclipse, was planned to take Buchchi Dai to Varanasi as per the desire of C. C. Mishra, so that her education could be started in right earnest. Every chapter of the novel, though distinct in conception and execution, is artistically disposed to sequences. The writer all through appears realistic and establishes intimacy with his readers by his directness of approach. No writer in Maithili literature tried these methods before *Kanyadan*.

The language is very much suitable in this context. The author has utilised living language consisting of terms and orders of speech used by common people. It is graphic, bright and pictorial. The writer has successfully crystalised the thoughts and

visions of plain people in distinct colloquial idioms. Underneath all these are subtle humour, witty remarks and pungent satire illuminated by the inventive genius of the writer.

Dr S. K. Mishra, an eminent critic of his works, is of the view that his creative genius was not attuned to novel writing. It was more consistent with other genres where he flourished better. He further says: "*Kanyadan* is a novel of its own time, not of perpetual significance. The society as depicted in *Kanyadan* or in *Dwiragaman* has almost changed. The problem raised in the novel is now found in the society in other dreadful forms. The present day's C. C. Mishra and his clan whose education is confined to a knowledge of alphabet alone and who obtain B.A. degrees by adopting unfair means at the examinations are ruining the lives of girls like Buchchi Dai. In order to meet huge dowry demands of grooms' fathers as also the demand of luxury items by grooms themselves, the brides' fathers fall in traps of colossal debts and thereby ruin their families."

However, this statement does not stand the test of critical scrutiny of Hari Mohan Jha's novels. His *Kanyadan* is considered as a first-rate work of art and an epoch-making novel. He did not write any more novel, because, though a prolific writer, he was not a professional one and hence remained confined to only shorter forms. In *Kanyadan* C. C. Mishra is neither a spurious degree-holder nor a dowry exhorter. His only demand is right-fully idealistic because of his vision of life. He cannot be compared to a misguided youth of the present-day society. The problem raised in *Kanyadan* is one of misalliance and has not lost its relevance even today.



## Short Stories

LIKE HIS NOVELS, Hari Mohan Jha is an exceptional forerunner of short stories in Maithili. In this respect his *Pranamyā Devatā* deserves special treatment. The book was first published in 1945 and is recorded by far as one of the earliest collections of Maithili stories. The writer has himself claimed it in his introduction of the book. He writes : "In life, if one perceives so, two sorts of pleasures precede all others, namely, good food and light-hearted gossip with friends. One who likes to taste a variety of dishes and enjoy graceful and elegant talks should come to Tirhut (Mithila), the land of Maithili speaking people... ..But it is rather amazing that the people of Mithila who are famous for 'gossip' are lagging behind in writing stories. There is not a single collection, even for the name of it. Here is *Pranamyā Devatā* to fill the vacuum."

Identifying *Pranamyā Devatā* as the first collection of stories in Maithili does not mean that story-writing in Maithili was never practised. Stories were published in magazines and a few collections had also come out but they were yet to be popular. Their plots were mostly flimsy, fabulous and devoid of relevance to the contemporary society. Jha has himself confessed that before he started writing, stories in Maithili were, by and large, concentrated around the affairs of meetings and partings of love-lorn maidens reflecting only the sentiments of love or pathos. Against this background he adopted a new style that was implanting humour in them and the result came out in the form of popular *Pranamyā Devatā*. The book had turned out to be a delightful surprise as a new genre in Maithili literature. It recorded a departure from the pathetic scenes so common in the earlier

Maithili fiction. The writer himself has asserted the "*Pranamya Devata* (just like Agni Devata, the fire-god) became popular right since its birth—it happens so when a new literary thirst is identified in literature." Thus the book is pledged to humour in Maithili literature.

However, the contents of *Pranamya Devata* cannot be said to be stories in the familiar sense. For, they are not in conformity with the style and techniques that had developed in the western literatures. Hari Mohan Jha has himself identified his stories as satirical sketches in which, whatever be the subject—folklore, fable, mythology or anything—his style of narration assumed uniqueness. It was traditional in content though, *Pranamya Devata* is a genre by itself. The contents here are entertaining as regular stories, and at the same time have special social purposes to serve. It blazed a trail and successive writers tried to imitate his style and themes of social concerns. While presenting a panorama of diverse themes the book has the indelible stamp of Hari Mohan Jha's free-speaking and often iconoclastic logic.

*Pranamya Devata*, means *Revered Divine Dignitaries*, which in fact is an ironical use. These stories are latent and obvious in element. They are all imbued with a comic gift peculiar to the author. To make good talk through wit and humour, talk that does not end merely as gossip, speaks of a serious use of certain qualities of speech in a living tradition. He helps, thus, to give a style and form to a living language.

As a man of learning in real life he refused to be cowed down by the authority or by tradition. This was the time when orthodox Mithila was being challenged by values and realism of modern education. Since the society was undergoing fast changes, the situation demanded a fresh awareness among people as to which of the old habits were required to be preserved and which were necessary to be discarded. Unusual discrimination was asked for.

Young writers easily exaggerate their desire to bring reforms in traditional practices even though they do not know much about these. It was not so in the case of Hari Mohan Jha. He had an intimate knowledge of his culture and traditions. In fact he

deeply loved aspects of its varied richness. And yet he was not unaware of its limitations and weaknesses. He therefore took it upon himself to represent the social milieu of Mithila of the time in all its strengths and weaknesses. For example, he loved the remarkable penchant of Maithils for intelligent conversation, wit and humour and treated it as a strong point in their favour. But faults and foibles of Maithil society are ever the butts of his criticism and satire.

In the stories, Hari Mohan Jha employs the *Katha* or narrative manner of Sanskrit which began with the *Panchatantra*. *Katha* is an indigenous genre in Sanskrit and other Indian languages characterised by loose but detailed narration and a moral. Though a modern writer, he adopted this classical model of his narrative technique. The couplets with which he concludes his sketches are a part of this technique and serve a similar purpose: they drive home to us a moral with an epigrammatic force.

Howsoever serious his criticism of life, his treatment of experience is invariably comic. His approach is often anti-sentimental. The elements of exaggeration, wit and humour serve as accessories to his criticism of life. Just beneath the gay surface of wit and repartee there is a serious indictment of certain hateful customs and manners, or human greed or lust. He appeared to take delight in viewing life from outside.

As it happens so often with comic writers in prose, his sketches or stories are not organized in a poetic sense from within. They are organized either around certain anecdotes fictionalized for the purpose or through a quick and intelligent exchange of wit. With every piece of *Pranamyā Devatā* as a package of comic brilliance, in which through wit, humour and flashes of pun some social evil or human weakness is held to ridicule and satire, Hari Mohan Jha takes us to the heart of human comedy. Some critics, however, hold the opinion that his pieces are the stuff of low comedy. But such opinions are far removed from the truth. Representation of characters looks distorted but that is done with a view to achieve comic effect. It is like showing a face in a laughing mirror. All comic artists resort to the art of exaggeration and caricature. His stories are immensely readable, on more than one plane.

The first of the sketches in *Pranamya Devata, Vikat Pahun* (Some odd guests) appears to be the first hand account of some gluttonous guests on way to Gaya to perform *pinda-dan* rites. The artistic aloofness in describing the experience renders the piece quite amusing.

They are an unscrupulous set of four, most unprincipled rustic individuals who claim to be the writer's relations. Quite unceremoniously they barge in to stay with him. Presumption gets the better of their attempt at being familiar with an unknown professor and superintendent of a college hostel. Arriving at midnight in the premises of his quarters adjacent to the college hostel, they storm their way in, jesting and laughing, donning the host's clothes, gorging themselves to the full till one of them starts vomiting. Such coarseness as though were not enough, they ask for money too, so that they could proceed on their pilgrimage. To add to the spoil, when they leave they also take away the hostel carpet. And seven years after, the writer still recalls how the money they had promised to return was never returned. A gap between their word and deed, indeed lack of all manners on their part in contrast to narrator's own role as a patient host to such misdemeanour, amuses the reader. Sensitive discrimination of what is odd—against what could be civilized or even merely humane—is the criticism implied in the representation of such uncouth figures from life.

Humour is the chief trait of *Adarsh Kutumba* (An Ideal Relation). But it is not humour plain and simple. It is coloured by sarcasm. This queer blend of humour and satire is born of the oddities and incongruities which the writer has observed in real life, hence they are so sharp and telling in effect.

This story, hence, is the result of a review of past experience by the narrator-observer. What he reminisces is an objective situation in life between a greedy son-in-law and a poor unwilling father-in-law. The youngman, just married, is carried away by a desire to show off at someone else's cost. Their tussle of intention at a cloth merchant's shop, transposed in a dramatic manner, offers an amusing account of a real-life situation. Critical all through the account, the narrator comes to the last two lines of a verse in Sanskrit offering a comment also.

The institution of marriage appears in different guises in Jha's shorter fiction too. *Ghar Jamai* (Living with In-law) presents another facet of the experience of marriage. A rich widow, having a spoilt daughter as her only child, decides to marry her to a simpleton of noble birth. Chulhai Jha, the groom here, is a very poor person, has a nodding acquaintance with Sanskrit grammar, gets the honour bestowable onto a son-in-law for a month. Then slowly he is reduced to the status of a servant within the family. He is made to work as a cook, and compelled to attend to all kinds of business at a short notice. The writer seems to be familiar with such an abuse of a vital relation in the Maithil context. Hence the relevance of the institution of marriage in such aberrations has been questioned almost with the directness of a problem play. Such as, one comes across in the plays of Bernard Shaw and Henric Ibsen.

The treatment meted out to the son-in-law amounts to serious caricature. Apart from surface levity of a jocular treatment, sketch of the hunted male figure has a human appeal. The situation leads to the extreme, however. Treated as a servant before other relations, the underdog rebels against the sham of his constraints. He throws, thus, to the winds all appearance of his denuded status. His assertion of self-will amounts to a criticism of such marriages. *Bhadeshak Namoon* (From the Off-Country) and *Angrejia Babu* (An Anglicised Youngman) are stories which present certain other facets of marriage in Mithila. The former is a story about the cultural gap between the Brahmanas of the North-East and their counterparts of the South who are derisively called *Dachinahu* (from the Southern country). The Brahmanas of the heartland of Mithila have always considered themselves superior in culture and refinement to those of the South. Consequently, as far as practicable, the elite Brahmanas of the North-East have always shied away from matrimonial alliance with the South.

This story is a comic dramatisation of what happens when circumstances compel an elite Northern Brahman to give away his daughter in marriage to a rich but uncouth peasant, Maujelal Jha, from the South. While the bride knows Sanskrit and speaks chaste Maithili, husband Maujelal Jha can converse only in a crude form of the language. Actually the story is an extended

piece of conversation between Saraswati, the wife and Maujelal, the husband. The language sensibility of the wife is so wounded that she vows not to have physical relationship with her husband till such time as he learns how to pronounce her name Saraswati correctly.

In the other story *Angrejia Babu* (An Anglicized Youngman) one comes across Madhukant, a college student from Patna, who makes two successive trips to his in-laws. The first, undertaken on the occasion of Holi, when he looks forward to meeting his newly wed wife as a man of fashion, is, however, aborted and the protagonist has to return without ever reaching his destination. A major part of the description builds up rosy pictures of his proposed meeting with his wife and sisters-in-law. They have, however, a pathetic effect when the tonga in which he is travelling, after alighting from the train, overturns. His foppish western attire is soiled and in his utter discomfiture he hides in a nearby field. His baggage containing the choicest articles for his beloved wife are picked up from the deserted road by his brother-in-law, whom he considered a rival in spite of his rusticity, on his way to the same place. Thus eluded by circumstances, he is left with no other option than to catch the next return train, envying the lot of his boorish competitor.

He takes another trip, nine months later, this time to bring his wife to his own village home. While travelling in a lonely first class compartment in the night, he behaves in a funny manner with his wife. In his whim to photograph her as a college girl, he presses her to pose befittingly, himself playing the role of her valet de chamber. She is led to the toilet for make-up. But before it could be completed, a knock at the door forces him to come out. The new entrant who boards the train at a road-side station happens to be none other than the groom's uncle. Left by herself, the poor village girl makes a mess of cosmetics and toiletry she had never seen before, let alone known their proper application. When she emerges from the toilet she exposes herself as an object of ridicule, with her funny dress, heavy make-up and unmanageable high-heels. She is made a butt in more than one way for her spouse's nonsensical behaviour and the writer takes delight in narrating them.

The story reveals the author's impatience with fools, like Madhukant, who do not hesitate to take liberties with established social norms in their bid to be called westernized. The central character is harshly drawn and exaggerated to become a caricature. At certain points the treatment is melodramatic. The humour, to some extent, looks a little forced. The description has, however, the objectivity of a dispassionate observer who manages to steal a laugh with his readers at every situation.

The swing of Jha's social criticism has, thus, varied from an attack on aping of the west to a perception of stagnation and disintegration of the joint family system. In *Sajhi Ashram* (A Joint Family), he comes to examine a typical collapse of a joint family and the chaos thereby. Asked by a marriage-broker (*gatak*) to meet the head of a family for a groom, the author-narrator comes across bizarre experiences of deteriorating values and conduct in a joint family. Unmanageable because of its size, housewives display only lack of love, maladjustment, ill-will and misunderstanding for one another, rendering its combined character to an unmeaningful existence. The message is: the joint family system is no longer a realistic proposition and sooner it vanishes the better. In all this Jha evinces a thorough knowledge of society in Mithila in the forties. Exploiting all the comic possibilities of language and situation, Jha is yet again at his comic brilliance even in such a realistic portraiture as the *Sajhi Ashram*.

If the earlier sketches and portraiture provide ground for a useful form of shorter fiction with respect to the themes of conjugal and familial bonds, in a story such as *Dharmashastraacharya* (A Theologian), the writer goes on to explore the inadequacy of rituals in the face of day-to-day real life compulsions. Man's conduct in life as per injunctions enshrined in *Dharmashastra* has been comically exposed as hopelessly untenable. The same has also been dramatically exemplified as not only impossible to observe but dangerous to abide by too. Mounting a scathing attack on Brahmanic orthodoxy, its out-of-date rituals and prescriptions for penance, the author effectively shows how the Brahmins had deprived our society of a flexible and dynamic attitude towards life.

Dhurandhar Shastri, the leading character of the story, has a traumatic experience of getting almost drowned when he takes an expiatory dip in the Ganga. This incident brings about a psychic change in his behaviour. Earlier, he used to quote scriptures for every lapse of a conduct and prescribe penance for the same to his own self and to others. With this change of heart, he now contradicts himself. Discarding ostentation of any kind, he is inclined towards the cardinal spirit of religion. When his disciple interrogates this shift in his attitude, he quotes Vyas, the celebrated sage of yore, according to whom an act which helps others is *punya* (virtue) and which hurts others is *pap* (vice). These two tenets now become a standard of perfection in the religious outlook of this theologian. The story is enlivened with humour and caricature.

The story *Jyotishacharya* (An Teacher of Astrology) is a brilliant satire on certain assumptions of astrology. These assumptions can easily be termed ridiculous. The rival astrologers of the story, Fuchai Jha and Khattar Jha are not unanimous on an auspicious day for going on a journey. Between the two specific days under contest, Sunday and Monday, one upholds the first and the other the second. Both exhibit their self-aggrandisement, citing favourable statements from allied sources and make confusion worst confounded. So Bhola Jha does not dare to attend the court and, thus, loses his lawsuit. Since there is no scientific apparatus to test and verify astrological assumptions, the author is severe in criticism. He castigates the practice and profession of this 'pseudo-learning'. In his opinion astrologers are a kind of dangerous social parasites who exploit our psychically credulous people. Several comic situations have been created to bait and beat astrologers with their own sticks. For example, there is an astrological belief that if a man ties a piece of *Isargat* (serpentina plant) on his wrist on the auspicious day, snakes won't bite him. But Fochai Jha is bitten by a cobra even while he has a chip of serpentine plant on his wrist. His disciples Adityanath and Martandnath pronounce his death as a certainty since the snake had bitten him during a particular time of the day when it has fatal effect. But Fochai Jha has no effect of snake-bite. The author



proves that astrology is definitely a pseudo-learning and also an elaborate mechanism to trap and fleece innocent people.

In another piece *Panditji* (The Scholar), the author takes upon himself the task of exposing another vice among traditional scholars, as he knew them. He found a deliberate exercise in overeating on their part to be an amusing theme for satire. The scholar's final vindication of his appetite is said to be an urge dictated by the Supreme Power only gives a philosophic dimension to a genre of life extremely entertaining.

*Kaviji* (The Poet) is a caricature of the poet portrayed as an effeminate creature. This is a light-hearted comedy wherein the message is much of what the poetic fraternity offers in verse is sham. Kaviji who sheds tears in verse for the plight of labourers rebukes his wife when she pays five rupees to the ploughman. He talks about bravery in verse but himself collapses with fear when a cat rattles the door at night. He invokes women to rise and liberate themselves from slavery to man but suspects his own wife and nearly stabs her out of jealousy. There is, of course, a yawning gap between the word and the deed of a poet. Jha also exposes penny versifiers who put up rhymes of hollow sentiments for money.

In *Bimak Agent* (A Life Insurance Agent) the author's target of attack is an insurance agent. To him as to most of us such an agent is a vegetative bore. To an agent every person is a potential client and he would stop at nothing to secure a deal. The unsuspecting academic is shadowed to Hazaribagh from Patna by the agent's wife and there she uses all her woman's charm to snare him. He allows himself to be insured for a heavier sum than he had approved of at first. His discovery that she was after all only the wife of the L I C agent he had met at Patna serves as anti-climax, and the dramatic proof of an agent's doggedness of pursuit. The effortless ease with which Jha exaggerates the pursuit theme to prove the agents' professional doggedness and the artistic balance he maintains in not allowing the plot to degenerate into romance is a marvellous feat indeed.

The shorter fictions of Jha, in their plot and craft, are not so developed as modern short stories are. The reason for this may be

that these were written in thirties and forties of this century, when there was little or no tradition of short story writing in Maithili. In fact, Jha was looking for a convenient literary form to mount his criticism against many social evils and against men and manners of orthodox Maithili society. Even then it must be admitted that Jha's shorter fictions are pioneering works in Maithili.

## Khattar Kaka-Ka Tarang

*KHATTAR KAKA-KA TARANG* (Brain Waves of Uncle Khattar) is Hari Mohan Jha's most popular literary work. Herein Jha changes the mode and manner of his fiction from those adopted earlier in his sketches and stories. It is a series of reflections of a keen mind in the garb of casual conversation. Thus the book defies all known literary forms and belongs to a genre by itself. The use of witty conversation round a number of themes gives each section of this book a point and a poignancy. The conversation which takes place between the uncle and the nephew is sparkling. The juxtaposition of two points of view—one of the acquiescent conformist (the nephew) and the other of the non-stickler critic of orthodox sophistries (the uncle)—leads to a state of dramatic tension in arguments for and against an issue. In this running dialogue between the two the nephew serves as a foil to draw out from Khattar Kaka's highly critical mind, sparkling wit and arguments against a contention. There are high moments in this inspired conversation, which begins as casual gossip and ends up in enlightened discourse. These brain waves of Khattar *kaka* are not really wanderings of a 'Bhang'-inebriated mind; they are, in fact, brilliant testimonies of a highly intelligent brain.

The range of *Khattar Kaka-Ka Tarang* is wide; in every topic of discussion *kaka* lashes at traditional assumptions, superstitions, and dogmatic approaches of all kinds. *Kaka's* interpretations of the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, the text of *Durga Saptasati* the story of *Satyadeva* and the Jyotish are incisive and original. So are his views on topics like the lunar eclipse, concept of Eternal Bliss and the conduct of gods. In all these as well as in topics like the

importance of fish, Brahmana-Bhojan (Feeding The Brahmans), what the shastras say, *Dahi-Chura-Chini* (Curd, Flattened Rice And Sugar) stories from the Puranas, the essence of philosophy and clues to the Vedas. *Kaka's* views run counter to the accepted beliefs. *Kaka* fills one with disbelief with his iconoclastic logic, served with witty and humour, which never allow the fare to grow dull. His popular puns, witty quips, use of local idioms as also the use of earthy analogies make the pieces irresistibly entertaining.

For an objective presentation of ideas, the writer has used a typical character called Khattar *kaka* as his *alter ego*. This *kaka* is a man of happy-go-lucky temperament. He relishes the cool liquid '*Bhang*' (drink prepared from hemp leaves) and in his charged moods offers high logic and scholarly discourse. *Kaka* is a great comic character, keenly alive to the incongruities of life and its cultural values. In argument he is a relentless logician, with a command over all Shastras and Puranic literature. This scholarship he fully exploits to substantiate his startling pronouncements. Replete with quotations from these sources, "every page of this sparkles with scintillating wit and humour, pun and repartee."<sup>1</sup> He is as much an 'incarnation' of Gangesh Upadhyaya, the famous logician of medieval Mithila as of Gonu Jha, well-known for his cunningness, presence of mind and humour of everyday life. Thus he combines in himself the classical tradition with the populist one.

Hari Mohan Jha's criticism is mainly directed against what is crude, absurd and incongruous in the traditional interpretation of *Shashtra* and *Puran*. The avowed intention of his satire is to separate the chaff from the grain and expose the truth. What is involved in such criticism is not merely castigation of the conventionalism but serious scrutiny of all kinds of Shastrik adage and statement. By the help of sheer wit Khattar *kaka* rejects age old values of life giving the reader a shock treatment, to his utter disbelief. For example he proves, with aesthetic justification, that Ravana is the only ideal character in the *Ramayana* and that the

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. "Ramakant Mishra, A Literary Giant"—*Indian Literature*, No.115 (September - October 1986).

guilty party in the *Mahabharata* is the Pandavas. He also tries to convince that the outcome of the war was the victory of vices rather than of virtues. *Kaka* also opines the Krishna deluded Arjuna in the *Geeta*. He proves with arguments and copious quotations that the *Ayurveda* is more erotic literature than a system of medicine, and argues to say that it is *Kamadeva* (Cupid), and not the *Brahma* who is the real creator of the world. In his opinion the authors of the Vedas were atheists and that the famous *Som Rasa* (*Som* juice) was, in fact, the juice of hemp leaves. Through his arguments he also proves how Sita's fidelity was rewarded with banishment and the unchaste wives of myths are held as virtuous.

Thus, it is in such ways that Khattar *kaka's* 'brain-waves' rock and tumble our traditional opinions—about the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, the *Karmakanda* and the *Dharmashastra*, the *Geeta*, and the *Vedas*, *Jyotish* and *Ayurveda*, *Tantra-Mantra*, of gods and goddesses, of Heaven and Hell, Rebirth and Emancipation et al.

There is nothing fanciful about Jha's wit, which is ratiocinative rather than imaginative in character. Through these talks, the reader is led to a different zone of experience in which what was blindly accepted as true ends up as humbug and nonsensical. It is not always a conscious use of logic in an academic sense which accounts for the quick rebuttals of accepted premises in myths and scriptures, life and letters, but a witty use of the same for a variety of purposes—inductive or formative, as the case may be.

The book contains a series of digressions around a number of themes, each of which serves as a fugue to seemingly intoxicated protagonist as he chooses to ruminate and argue. What gives unity to this work as fiction is the continuity of the two characters, the uncle and the nephew. Topics on which the nephew provokes the uncle are, however, diverse in nature.

The first piece of this book called *Dahi-Chura-Chini* (Curd, Flattened Rice And Sugar) is a satire on Maithils' love for gossip and food. Maithils, especially Brahmans among them, are great eaters, they are gourmands rather than gourmets. *Chura* (flattened rice), *dahi* (curd) and *chini* (sugar) are ready-to-eat items of food and their availability is ensured in every Maithil household

for guest as well as for inmates. To avoid the botheration of cooking, the people of this region use this combination in breakfast, lunch as well as in dinner. This food is also used in community dinner and feasts. It is considered not only delicious but also wholesome as diet. But this food is heavier than cooked rice and pulse and, consequently takes time to digest. Because of its heaviness it induces sleep and makes one indolent.

In a mock-serious vein the writer's *alter ego*, Khattar kaka calls this 'three-in-one' food as *trigunatmak shakti* (three sources of power) and amplifying the comparison further says that 'chura' is *tama*, 'dahi' *sattwa* and 'chini' *raja-guna*, a la *Sankhya* philosophy. Earlier kaka had compared 'chura' with earth (*Bhoolok*), 'dahi' with space (*Bhuvarelok*) and 'chini' with paradise (*Swargalok*). Dilating on food and food habits of people and their impact on human nature, Khattar kaka offers an interesting explanation that since Bhojpur people use salt and chilli in their diet of *sattu* (flour made of popped gram) they are rough in speech and manner in comparison to the Bengalees and Maithils who eat a lot of sweets.

Behind all this mock-serious discussion on food and food habits of people, specially of Mithila, the basic intention of the author was to deride Maithils for their laziness and gluttony. The satiric burden is to emphasis the point that since Maithils are indolent gluttons they are bound to suffer as people.

In *Machak Mahatwa* (Importance Of Fish), the next piece on the agenda, kaka says that the Maithils love fish as much as Bengalees. In Mithila fish is considered not only an important source of nutrition but also an emblem of good luck. The sight of fish at the start of a journey is considered eminently auspicious.

Lashing at the vegetarians, Khattar kaka says that even their god Rama was a meat-eater. He also informs his nephew that ancient writers like Manu and Yajnavalkya have referred to many names of fishes. Replying to the vegetarians' arguments that the construction of human teeth proves *homo sapiens* to be born vegetarians, kaka humorously remarks that even then most of us eat fish and for that we don't have to borrow teeth from cats. Enlightening his nephew on the subject further kaka says that though most Maithils are *Shaktas*, they also worship Shiva and

Vishnu. The *Vaishnavas* preach 'pity' for the living beings but if pity is pushed very far, it would be extremely difficult for the homo sapiens to survive. Hence *kaka* pronounces Vaishnavism as unscientific and untenable. Life subsists on life and this is the organic basis of existence. *Kaka* further informs that during Vedic periods animals were sacrificed for *yajna* and for food.

In the third piece entitled *Brahman Bhojan* (Feeding The Brahmins) he takes the priests to task for their gluttony and greed. In an interesting scrutiny of their functions he holds that they enjoyed a certain importance in the past because others around them were illiterate. *Kaka* mounts a scathing attack on Brahman priest for defrauding Hindu society for their personal gains. Hindus observe a series of rites and rituals, all the year round, out of religious fear, little knowing that scriptural regulations were made by Brahmanic priests out of purely selfish motives. To the nephew's query regarding the 'rationale' behind *Brahman Bhojan*, *kaka* ironically remarks that since Brahmins claim to be the 'mouths' of Brahma on earth, their mouths are sacrosanct and hence, these must be fed with delicacies to satisfy the creator (Brahma). Hence, as the main function of the mouth is to eat, Brahmins do nothing except eating. Other castes, associated with lower limbs of Brahma, are meant to do only manual labour. In reply to the question of the credit of creating *Dharmashastra* by Brahmins, *Kaka's* ironic reply is that in fact it was not a *Dharmashastra* but an *Arthashastra* (Economics) which they had devised. Quoting a well-known *sloka* (verse-statement) *kaka* reminds his nephew about how, while other castes (*varnas*) worked with their hands and feet to earn their living, the clever Brahmins lived by their wits alone (*Budhdhijeevi hi Brahmanah*). Exposing the elaborate nature of their fraud in arranging free meals for themselves, all the year round, *kaka* says that *parmundu falahar* (eating at the expense of others) was their grand design. They saw to it that they ate at the birth ceremony as well as the death rites (*shradha*) at their clients.

Khattar *kaka's* iconoclasm scores yet another direct hit in the next piece *Satyadevak Katha* (The Story Of God Of Truth). There is a tradition in Mithila of performing a pooja (worship) to Lord Satyanarayan in the evening of every full-moon day. The pooja is

rounded off with a narration of Lord's way of reward and admonition to his devotees. Taking a critical look at the story from mundane angle, *kaka* says that in this story god is represented as a malevolent tyrant. Asked by the nephew as to how *kaka* dares to criticise Lord God and his ways, *kaka* replies in the following manner:

"Oh, I do not criticise god. I criticise only those who constructed such a tale in His name. The story shows Him to be selfish, from the beginning to the end. If you listen to it, you come to the conclusion that He is a very greedy, wicked and a jealous God. Such narratives beget only disgust rather than love for God."

Kaka proves with illustrations that the image of the Lord of Truth which is projected by this narrative tallies with a power-loving whimsical landlord. It is not the picture of a kind and benevolent God; rather it is of a God who punishes you for minor lapses and loves sycophancy and obeisance of an abject kind. In a flash of bitter irony *kaka* compares this cruel God with his relative Lutti Jha and his volatile temper.

When Hari Mohan Jha penned these scathing satires on priests and priesthood, his intention was not to establish himself as an atheist but to expose the Brahmanic conspiracy of fleecing gullible people in the name of God. No other writer before him in Maithili had the courage to speak with such bold irreverence against traditions established by priests. Call it sacrilege or iconoclasm, no other writer has battered Brahmanic fort of *Karmakand* with such virulent logic as Jha has done in his brilliant tract *Brahman Bhojan*. He seethes with anger and contempt for the priests and calls them social parasites. With brilliant ironical puns, wit, and sarcasm, Jha does not only paints the Brahmanic priests as cheats in the name of religion but also treats many statements of Manu and Yajnavalkya in favour of Brahmins as blatant anachronisms.

Thus, in piece after piece of Khattar *kaka*'s 'brain waves' we have his electrifying logic ruthlessly exposing lies and levities of *Shastru* and *Puran*. In the tract *Jyotish* (Astrology) *kaka* is harsh and angry with astrologers who, in his eyes, are pedlars of lies.



Like *Dharmashastra* and its ten duties (*Dashakarma*) enjoined by it for the orthodox and the credulous, astrology too has an octopus-grip on our psyche. Locking horns of logic with the basic astrological assumption that the movement of planets has a direct bearing on human beings, *kaka* does not only disbelieve it, he also holds the view that the astrological presumptions attributed to Bhrigu and Parasara are purely mythical. For, these do not stand the test of reasoning and experience. *Kaka* suspects that this elaborate system of lies known as 'astrology' was calculatedly designed to instil fear of malevolent planets into peoples' mind so that they might run to astrologers for help. Priests, thus, perform Poojas for propitiating the malevolent among nine planets for their clients. Those who have blind faith in astrology would not move an inch without consulting their astrologers. They make our horoscope and chart the course of our lives. Such dependence on a system which does not stand to reason or science makes *kaka* bitter with anger.

*Kaka's* encounter with Musai Jha, the astrologer, and his clients is a dramatic illustration of how people are cheated in the name of astrology. Even though the themes are generally polemical in nature, Hari Mohan Jha, with his spice of wit and humour, never allows the fare to go dull. The pieces conceived as one-act plays in which arguments substitute for characters, are little gems of brilliant literary humours and satire.

In another piece called *Devatak Charitra* (Behaviour Of Gods) *kaka* dares to judge gods and their actions from the standards of human ideals and find them full of blemishes. Citing familiar examples of *Indra-Ahilya*, *Devasur Sangrama* (Battle Between gods and demons) and the famous episode of Brahma's attempt at ravishing his own daughter, *kaka* expresses surprise as to how such gods should be worshipped as ideals by the mortals. In the tone of banter that might appear blasphemous to the orthodox, *kaka* says that the gods had no 'guardian' and that is why they behaved in such a wayward fashion. *Kaka* startles his nephew by saying the Kamadeva (Cupid) is the only god whom even Mahadeva could not kill. Elucidating the symbolic worship, 'Linga Pooja' (Phallic Worship) he says that the five arrows of

Kamadeva (Cupid's arrows) are, in fact, the five senses of which our bodies are made.

Kaka's lucid analyses of the mythical gods and their *ililas* (amusing pastimes) and his final verdict that the only god is Kamadeva (Cupid, 'sex') is (while being erudite) also impishly empirical.

In yet another piece entitled *Bhagavanak Charcha* (Talking About God) Kaka trains his logical canon on the fatalistic philosophy of fate as propagated by the Vedantic philosophers. Referring to the concept of *Aadi Purush* (The Lord Of The Creation) *kaka* says that this, as well as other stories about creation, are only myths. Hence, the legend inscribed on the banner of Fatalists "*yatha niyuktosmi tatha karomi*" (I act as per my fate determined by God) is a motto for the morons and not the wise. *Kaka* tells his nephew that it is not easy to know why God, if there is a God, created 'man' and 'tiger' at the same time, and adds that philosophers have come and gone without resolving the mystery. By all this *kaka* intends to emphasise that fatalism is a defeatist philosophy and that man is the architect of his own destiny.

In *Shastrak Vachan* (Prescriptions And Inhibitions) *kaka* proves how most of these *vachans* ascribed to Manu and Parasara are irrational and irrelevant in modern times. *Shashtra* says that while sleeping in our homes we should keep our heads to the east but while sleeping at the in-laws' place our heads should lie towards the south. Would it not be funny if wife and husband slept with their heads in opposite directions?—he asks. The dos and don'ts of 'Shastras' might have had a meaning in ancient times but, since the same do not stand the test of reason and science, they have little meaning for us today. Hence, the Shastric '*idam kuryat*' and '*idam na kuryat*' (do's and don'ts) are only halters in the neck of society.

In the piece called '*Prachin Adarsha*' (Ancient Ideals) *kaka* finds faults with the so-called ideal characters of our mythology, whether they are Bhisma, Drona, Dushyanta, Viswamitra, Aruni or Harishchandra. He lashes at the myth-makers for using hyperboles and exaggeration to the extent that these characters do not convince us as credible ideals for human beings. *Kaka* is sarcastic

about all '*avatara*' taking place in our country alone. Our four, five, and six-headed gods are strange creatures created by mythologists, and yet we have been taught to treat them as ideals.

In *Dharmak Tatva* (Quintessence Of Religion) *kaka* shocks and surprises his nephew (a common man) with his own interpretation of *dharma* (righteousness), and, in a satirical vein, says that only "self-aggrandizement rather than service to others is righteousness and self-suffering a sin". Elucidating the philosophy of *atma rakshito darmah* (it is our duty to protect ourselves) *kaka* says that it is foolish to carry 'pity' too far. Bed-bugs and mosquitoes have to be killed lest they should suck our blood. Sniping at Sannyasis (renunciants) and Brahmacharies (celibates) *kaka* says that their 'orders' run counter to the concept of creation. The piece regales the readers with amusing verbal quips and sarcastic remarks against the renunciants.

Giving a severe bashing to the so-called philosophers on the concepts of re-birth, emancipation (*moksha*) and heaven (*swarga*) hereafter in his piece entitled *Mokshak Vichar*, *kaka* confidently declares that the 'cob-web of *moksha*' was created by scripture writers to intimidate and tempt people. They dangle an imaginary heaven of perennial bliss before our eyes and ask us to practise penance and observe celibacy in the hope of bedding *Urvashi* and *Menaka* in the life hereafter (*Swarga*). *Kaka* firmly believes that the concept of *prarabdha* (fate) is the main cause of our indolence and inaction in every field of life. Brushing aside *karmakand*, *yoga* and *Brahmajnana* as rubbish, *Kaka* unabashedly declares himself a disciple of *Charvaka* who said: "I am happy with the pigeon in hand than with an imaginary peacock I may get later on. A bird in hand is worth two in the bush." Hence *kaka's* final verdict is in favour of enjoying life here alone, and for that he prescribes '*bhoga*' rather than '*yoga*' for man.

*Kaka* negates popular opinions with teasing logic. Thus, his opinions about the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* run counter to the popular outlook. He does not exonerate *Rama* for his act of great cruelty in banishing *Sita* on an imaginary allegation made against her by a washerman. He says that for *Rama* kingship was more important than his love for *Sita* who had walked through

fire to prove her chastity. In a mood of rebellion he adds that in the *Ramayana* Ravana's character seems to him more consistent than Rama's even though the former was a demon. Kaka justifies Sita abduction by Ravana as an act of rightful revenge against the two brothers who had chopped off his sister Surpanakha's nose. Kaka lauds Ravana for restraint in not outraging the modesty of Sita even though he was so provoked. Kaka cites examples to prove that on many occasions Rama had acted beyond the call of moral justice.

But when the nephew points to Kaka's inexcusable blasphemy of lauding the proverbial demon Ravan in comparison to god Rama, Kaka gives the whole body of his arguments a sweet twist and says that since Kaka belonged to Mithila, place of marriage of Rama, he had the traditional right to criticise and abuse Rama and his kins.

The author pretends to read the myth as real history and, in his search for human relevance and moral credence, raises more questions than he can solve then. The catechismal framework, common sense approach, verbal embellishments, and humorous puns and innuendoes are appealing.

Likewise, in his piece *The Mahabharata*, kaka is relentless in flaying the Pandavas. He boldly calls *Dharmaraj* (Yudhisthira) a *Budi-raj* (King of Fools) for his addiction to dice and for putting his wife on the stake board. He also calls Draupadi's remark against Duryodhana as most provocative and holds it as the root cause of Mahabharata carnage. Kaka expresses surprise as to how Ahilya, Draupadi, Tara, Kunti and Mandodari—all of whom had questionable morals—have been idealised as women worthy of our adulation every morning. He also accuses Vyasa of being partial to Pandavas.

For the common man who would not delve deep into the myths' 'hidden' meaning, kaka's mundane logic has a staggering effect. He sarcastically remarks that the only message one learns from *The Mahabharata* is that one should shun gambling lest one has to wage a fratricidal war.

In *Geetak Marma* (The Quintessence Of The Geeta) kaku light-heartedly brushes aside the *Geeta's* philosophy as facile and

expedient. The entire exercise of Krishna is to make Arjuna agree to fight and, when his philosophy of '*Nishkama Karma*' fails to dispel Arjuna's squeamishness in fighting with his kins, he intimidates him with his divine form (*virat roop*) and hypnotises him into obedience. *Kaka* quotes from the text to show how there are contradiction inherent in the *Geeta*

In his piece called *Puratan Sabhyata* (Ancient Civilization) *Kaka* takes a keen look at our ancient civilisation and gives a penetrating account of arduous life the sages of yore must have lived. Explaining to his nephew the root meaning of word like '*Devata*' and '*Ishvar*' *Kaka* informs that '*Devata*' meant one who wore shining apparel and *Ishwar* were those fortunate ones who had enough wealth (*Aishvarya*). He further informs his nephew that our ancient civilisation was, in fact, not as glorious as it is made out to be. In comparison, our modern world with its science and its practical uses is far more easy and comfortable.

Khattar *Kaka*'s repertory is vast and varied. His topics of discussion range from '*Dahi, Chura, Chini*' to '*Kavyak Rasa* (The Essence Of Poetry) and in all these his grand design is to reflect truth by exposing hypocrisy, superstition, and sham shows of all kinds. He dissects and analyses and exposed the rotten entrails of the august body of our religio-cultural values as contained in *Dharmashastra*. He spares none, neither gods nor their creators and, in this exercise, delivers crippling blows to *Karmakand*, *Veda-Vedanta*, *Smriti* and *Jyotisha*. Even philosophers and poets do not escape the vice-grip of *Kaka*'s logic. He is relentless in exposing the 'vulgarity' in *Veda* and *Purana*. He shocks his average readers with his quotations from the *Sri Mad Bhagavat* which are nakedly erotic, and shows how thin is the line between vulgarity and *Bhakti*. He proves with copious citations that Rigvedic age was primitive. However in *Bhootak Mantra* (Exorcising The Ghost) and *Chandragrahan* (Lunar Eclipse) he draws on robust common sense to get rid of superstition and blind faith.

In *Mithilak Sanskriti* (The Culture Of Mithila) *Kaka* laughs at those who crow about Mithila's past glory just for the mawkish love of the region. *Sri Mad Bhagvat* mentions that the people of Mithila were 'free from doubts'. This *kaka* sarcastically remarks,

was probably because the people here have been traditionally addicted to *bhang* and when, as *kaka* himself does, you take *bhang* regularly and in good dosage you are free from all doubts. *Kaka* welcomes modernity overtaking the land of Janaka and Yajnavalkya. But while welcoming the change in dress and diet in Mithila, *kaka* is fiercely jealous of his 'Mach-Bhat' (Fish Curry And Rice) and would, in no case, exchange it with the chop and cutlet of the west. The piece, though light in import and mild in satire, is still full of his customary quota of verbal fireworks.

A similar parochial love for the region is also reflected in another piece entitled '*Chanakyak Janmabhumi*' (The Birth-place Of Chanakya) where *kaka* satirically charges those who, in their over-enthusiasm, claim Mithila to be the birth-place of the arch-diplomat.

Hari Mohan Jha was the first Maithili writer to have devised such an ingenuous form of writing. Few had, before or after him, courage and boldness, art and imagination to dull doze edifices of traditional opinions with such ratiocinative wit and humour. For effective shooting at targets, Jha had to create a fictional *kaka* who was drunk on 'bhang' and a nephew to provoke him to talks, an artistic design without which he might have been accused as 'raving'.

Even while the book met with an instant and raving success, there were angry protests which, of course, came from the traditional stronghold of the priestly class of Sanskrit Pundits.

The pundits charged Jha with being a Charvakian atheist set on defiling *Samatan Dharma*. Angry articles appeared in the contemporary periodicals against Khattar *kaka* who was identified with Hari Mohan Jha himself. But even as the protest continued, it was virtually drowned in the general applause. The plaudits which Jha received for his magnun-opus *Khattar Kaka-Ka Tarang*, no other prose-work in Maithili could match as yet.

## Ekadashi

IN POPULARITY HAILED as the Vidyapati of Maithili prose, Hari Mohan Jha touched no literary genre which he did not turn into gold. Equally popular for his stories, the eleven one of this collection culled from various sources, give us the quintessences of his genius as a master story-teller. Unlike the fictional pieces of *Pranamiya Devata*, the stories of this volume are straightforward narrative tales, written between 1948 and 1974. Most of these stories first appeared in two volumes of his miscellaneous writings, namely, *Rangshala* (1949) and *Charchari* (1966). Some of these have also been chosen from periodicals. Spanning a period of over twenty-five years, these stories offer a unique opportunity to study his mind and craft—and also the new stylistic trends that he introduced to the Maithili short story. Thematically, these stories have a distinct regional flavour and a strong nascent form.

Hari Mohan Jha set the trend of his short stories in the mould of western form. He might well have looked for the models in *Katha-Sarit-Sagar* or *Panch-Tantra*, but alertly monitoring what then was being written in the west and also other major language of India, he gradually produced memorable pieces in the story form, like *Panch Patra* (Five Letters), *Railak Anubhava* (Experience Of A Train Journey), *Totama* (A Cure For Hiccup), and *Babak Samskar* (Father's Funeral). Though Jha's genius lay chiefly in humour and satire, in some of these stories he tells of human tragedy in sober overtone.

It should be remembered that background and characters of his stories are mostly rural. His main concern was to highlight and correct some of the social ills from which the chief

community, the Brahmans, suffered. He waged a relentless war against their orthodox ways and their stranglehold on the society in general. Since Mithila had no industry, no city and a few major towns, its culture remained predominantly rural. Jha wished to inject some urban liberalism into the veins of Mithila. All his writings were an effort in this direction.

Hari Mohan Jha's success as a story-writer may largely be attributed to his keen awareness of life's little ironies. His empathic response to the manifold situations of life around him is amply reflected in the best of his stories. *Panch Patra* (Five Letters) is a tale of a Sanskrit teacher of the pre-independence days. Through five short letters, purportedly written by the protagonist to his wife and son at different points of time, during 1919 to 1959, the author unfolds the misery and desolation of a whole life-time. These letters are, in a way, capsules of time, each of a decade, exposing the state of his mind at various stages of life. Thus they offer a dramatisation of his growth in maturity. The first of these is a love letter recording the youthful student's yearning for his newly-wed wife. The second letter reveals the practical sense of a man of the world as he steps into life. It expresses a certain dignity and restraint on his part together with a sense of responsibility for his ageing mother, his wife and children at home. In the third letter financial worries, such as crop failure, the spectre of hunger looming over his family, the debt which needed servicing etcetera and the problem of his young daughter's marriage occupy the mind of the middle-aged Sanskrit teacher. The regret for having married his son for dowry is the content of the fourth letter written in reply to his wife's complaint about the unseemly behaviour of their errant daughter-in-law. The last letter, written in failing health, is addressed to the son as the old teacher waits for his death at Kashi. Herein he informs that he has discarded taking medicine as for him now, the holy water of Ganga is the only medicine and Narayan (The Lord) is the only physician—*aukhadham jahnavi toyam vaidyo Narayano Harih*. It reflects an attitude of renunciation and resignation in life.

The story, one of the sparest in verbal sinew, reads like the synopsis of a novel which was never written. Probably it was because that would have been too drab and too familiar a tale to



narrate. This is then the tragic synopsis of the life-span, not only of certain individuals but also of a class of people of Mithila of those days. The highest a poor Brahman's son could dream of in those days was to become a Sanskrit teacher. Craftwise, the story has Chekhovian conciseness, for, its matter-of-factness and objectivity are object lessons for future story tellers.

The next story, *Kanyak Jeevan* (Life Of A Girl Child) is a pathetic tale about a young widow. Child-marriage and widowhood which have been the bane of Hindu society for long have been much written about. Bengal has given us many moving tales of child widows. Though there is nothing new in respect of the theme of the present story, Jha's magic pen once again moves our heart with the pathetic image of Tittir Dai, the widow. The flashback takes us fourteen years behind when the narrator-hero was smitten by her innocent beauty and the sprightliness of her manners. Now what he finds, to his utter surprise, is Tittir Dai, shrouded in a piece of tattered Sari, her head shaven, her eyes having gathered cesspool of sorrow. A beautiful girl who was once an object of romantic aspirations for the hero was now a pathetic figure of pity. It was not age but the cruelty of custom which had withered and widowed her charms.

There might have had real-life models. The Pundit of *Panch Patra* (Five Letters), for all we know, might be his own father who was a Sanskrit teacher. Likewise, the widow of this story might be one whom he knew quite closely. In art and objectivity, presentation and style, the story is not only a true imitation of real characters but also of the life of the time it portrays.

The third story, *Railak Anubhava* (Experience Of Train Journey), while driving home the much-needed message of fellow-feeling also offers amusing descriptions of a train journey. It dramatically underlines the fact that while the mother-tongue has a binding effect on the Bengalis, it is not so in the case of Maithili-speaking people. A Bengali babu and his family are shown to occupy most part of a berth in the crowded compartment. All persuasions by the non-Bengali passengers fail to make him budge an inch. While his intractableness makes the standing passengers angry. His replies, in faulty Hindi, also amuse many.

The Bengali *babu*'s verbal skirmishes with the Marwari, the Maithil, and the Nepali Gorkhas are faithfully and amusingly reproduced. The story reaches its climax when another Bengali family arrives on the scene. The intractable Bengali soon realises that the new arrivals are also Bengalis. He had noticed a copy of *The Anand Bazar Patrika* in the hands of the gentleman. Having observed that he beckoned him, 'O *Moshai, aie dige ashun*' (Hallo, please come here). Later he did not only offer seats to the new entrant family but also shared home-made cookies with them. Even while rueing the fact of the obdurate Bengali's uncivility, it startlingly dawns upon the author that it was the common mother-tongue which had brought about the magic change in the former Bengali's attitude. The author remarks: 'This was then the magic of the *Anand Bazar Patrika*. The language, Bengali, has such powers that the two Bengalis, till now unknown to each other, suddenly got united in the bonds of brotherhood.'

As an anticlimax to the story, the author later presents a totally different scene in another railway compartment showing how the Biharis, including Maithils, were callous to one another even though they spoke more or less the same language. In this scene where an old woman, her son and the daughter-in-law are inhumanly pushed out of the train, the selfish crowd is moved neither by linguistic fraternity nor by the respect for womanhood. The juxtaposition of the two completely contrary scenes gives the story a poignant edge compelling us to ponder why in spite of geographical proximity there is such difference between the lands of Bengal and Mithila. 'Padma (a river of Bengal) and Kamala (a river of Mithila) are synonyms, then why such a difference in their waters.' The discrepancy in the attitudes of the Bengali gentleman before and after the arrival of the Chatterjee family might naturally appear ridiculous and selfish, but it gives an extra depth to his values of linguistic superiority. The story is an excellent specimen of creation with purpose. It drives home the point that we cannot flourish unless we cultivate a strong sense of respect for our mother-tongue.

In plot and design there is a classical neatness about Jha's stories. The message is finely woven in the plot. He also had a crusading zeal for certain social reforms. For example, he was a

great champion of female education, the pathetic lack of which in Mithila had filled him with anger and disgust. With the spread of female education he was hopeful that the *purdah* system would also eventually die out and Mithila would join the mainstream of modernity. It is in this light that two of his stories, *Maryadak Bhang* (Loss Of Grace) and *Gram Sevika* (The Lady Village Worker) are important. In both, the author highlights the denial of freedom to the weaker sex and a non-realisation of her dignity. He also strikes at the roots of the *purdah* system and male chauvinism.

In *Maryadak Bhang*, the guest from Dularpur village has a pleasant surprise in finding the daughter-in-law of the house boldly receiving him without *purdah*. How the elder ladies of a typical Maithil Brahman household run helter-skelter for cover on the unannounced entry of the guest is a hilariously amusing piece of description.

*Gram Sevika*, an attack on male chauvinism, evinces a bold justification for the independence of women in a male dominated social order. The sight of a bold and emancipated young woman going about the job of social work raises eye-brows of the village elders. The story is all about the drastic change in the attitude of the village-folk, men and women alike, to her. Even those who were once critical of her crossing the womanly limits give her a hearty farewell at her transfer with tears in their eyes, as if some goddess was being taken out for immersion. The gossip about the *purdah*-free *gram sevika* at the bathing ghat of the village pond and the evening camp-fires is authentically captured and dramatically reproduced. The message does not float on the surface, instead is woven in the fabric of the story unobtrusively.

While discussing Jha's concern for the uplift of women, one must not overlook another related story *Graduate Putauhu* (The Graduate Daughter-In-Law) which appeared in the first edition of the present collection, but was subsequently dropped for a new piece, thus keeping its numerical strength intact. Here a graduate daughter-in-law suffers the indifference and apathy of her conservative in-laws, paradoxical though it may sound, on account of her liberal education and independent views. She is also held

responsible for ruining the prospects of a handsome dowry for their son. The story ends on a tragic note with the death of the lady from snake-bite. Her death, however, delivers her from the bondage of orthodoxy of a custom-ridden society. These stories also reveal Jha's conception of the 'new woman' as man's partner in life rather than his subordinate.

Two other pieces of this collection, *Tirhutam* and *Totama*, though also message-oriented, are humorous satires. *Tirhutam* connotes excessive hospitality causing discomfort. *Tirhutam* is also related to the word *Tirhut* which is one of the many names of Mithila, a land famous for hospitality. However, if the same crosses its limits, that is not only irksome but also becomes a source of acute discomfort. How once the author himself was brought almost to the verge of tears on account of an overdose of hospitality is the humorous theme of the story *Tirhutam*.

The author had missed an evening train at the Purnea station, and just when he was moving towards the waiting room to retire for the night, a gentleman recognised him as the celebrated Maithili writer. He also claimed him to be one of his distant relations and insisted that he must stay at his place for the night. All the protests of the author fell on deaf ears and the author was virtually dragged to the gentleman's house which was however still under construction. The zealous yet miserly host had not even the courtesy of hiring a rickshaw for his honourable guest who had to foot the whole distance of four miles to his house. He was given a cot to lie on, and was served food at a very late hour in the night because the meal, sumptuous though for the distinguished guest, required a lot of preparation. Besides all these inconveniences, the author had also the harrowing experience of encountering a nest of cobras near a very dirty latrine pit. How the author could not ease himself and how, while running for dear life, he fell and got entangled in a pile of building materials, and how he finally escaped by car to reach the station in the morning, only to miss another train, are the hilarious highlights of the nightmarish hospitality.

*Totama*, though not much of a satire, is yet an example of Jha's originality of theme and humour. The story is about an

ingenuous cure for hiccup. Built upon trifles, it is remarkable for a playful heightening of suspense and a delicate patterning of conversation. A young man who had run away from his village home in anger is returning after a lapse of seven years. During this period he had had no information about his kith and kin at home. At Samastipur railway station he meets a village uncle and naturally wants to know all about his home. This uncle was an Ayurvedic practitioner who, finding his nephew having a hiccup, applies a *totama*. On being asked how all were at home, the uncle says that his mare was dead, and when the nephew asks how, the uncle informs with a straight face that the mare had perished in the fire which had broken out in his house. Shocked and surprised at the bad news, the nephew further enquires about the well-being of his family members. The uncle then tells him that the fire had broken out on the *shradha* day of his father. Now when the nephew starts weeping he is informed by the uncle that his father had died in grief for his mother who had pre-deceased him, and that now there was no house and no member in his family. The last dose proved the last straw on the camel's back, and the agonised nephew decides to go back to take complete renunciation of the world. It was then that the uncle tells him that all the bad news given to him was false, and that it was only a *totama*, an ingenuous cure, for his hiccup. With suspense and surprise as its mainstay, the story is a marvel of its kind, and has often been successfully staged as a one-act play or humorous interlude by village youths. Obviously it has an element of drama in it.

The next story *Teerth-Yatra* (Pilgrimage), the longest one in the collection, actually reads like a chapter from a novel. The story is a trenchant attack on the tradition of pilgrimage, particularly upon the rapacity of cruel communities of self-seeking *Pandus* to whose mercy we submit ourselves while getting fleeced in the name of religion. More than individuals, it is a story about certain types of characters like Alopinath, Musai Jha, Lalkaki and Sahjopisi, the credulous men and women of Mithila, who periodically undertake such religious journeys to shrines at Baidyanathdham and Jagannath Puri. Amidst brilliant patches of life-like descriptions in the story one cannot miss the author's sad

comment on the boorishness and the lack of education and enlightenment among the country folk of Mithila. Jha is superb in painting types rather than individuals. Another remarkable point about his stories is his personal voice never intrudes into a story. The story is allowed to unfold itself in natural sequences.

The charge, dullness, cannot be levelled against Jha. He hardly wrote anything that was insipid. He never allows his readers' attention to flag. Though most of his stories are humorous, some like *Alankar Shiksha* (Teaching Rhetoric) depend for their success not only on humour but also on ingenuous unity of concept, theme and design. Completely free from didacticism, *Alankar Shiksha* is an instance of pure tale relying solely on verbal exercise and the use of prose as a functional medium. The pupil of a Sanskrit *pundit* of *sahitya* (literature) comes to his Guru for a course in literature at his village home. Just about that time the Guru overhears ladies of his house shouting and hurling abuses at one another indoors. Instead of getting annoyed and being embarrassed by the female cacklings, the *pundit* invites his pupil to overhear the bandying of words by ladies, and thereby, have a course in rhetoric. The *pundit* thus teaches his astonished student simile, metaphor, transferred epithet, irony, sarcasm, innuendo and other figures of speech by identifying and explaining every abuse, every idiom and statement made in the course of the bickerings. Instead of a textbook analysis which might confuse his pupil with academic intricacies, the *pundit* chooses to give him a practical demonstration of these figures in order to make things easy. Satirical in import and ironical by design, the present story is a brilliant example of Jha's ready wit. Appearing like tactful devise of 'learning while playing', the story is deeply satirical of some women's quarrelsome nature. Though all Jha's literature is replete with verbal humour, this piece is a shining specimen of its kind.

Unlike *Alankar Shiksha*, *Babak Samskar* (Father's Funeral) is a rare tale of tragedy with horrifying dimensions. The story rises from the religious belief that the best place for a Hindu to die is either Banaras or any other bank of the river Ganga. Thus the oldies from rich and elite families who were mature enough to die soon were brought either to Banaras or to other banks of the holy

river. But human nature has no fixed standards, and the same God who created the lamb also created the tiger. Bhagirath Jha's sons—Ajay, Vijay, Sanjay, Dhananjay and Mritunjay et al—were not lambs but cruel tigers masquerading as human beings. Like his mythological counterpart, Bhagirath, had done every thing possible, with his labour and perseverance, to make the lives of his sons comfortable. He had left them orchards and a lucrative cultivation. But now that the old man had no brawn left and had earned his much deserved retirement and rest, the cruel sons and their crueller spouses grudged his useless existence. They noticed that even at his age of eighty the old man had a good appetite. His health and fitness earned him the sobriquet '*Jaralgava*', and the sons used to tell him on the face that he would never die. Since the room he occupied was a much needed space for the sons and their spouses, the old man was pushed out to lodge in the outhouse, and subsequently to the lean-to where bullocks were tethered. None of the sons attended on him and his meals were served always with abuses. Thus humiliated the old man cursed his lot, cried for disease to strike him down and for death to deliver him away from this despicable existence. But he was still fit as a fiddle and no disease touched him. Now the sons grudged even the little space he was given in the cattle-shed, for it was the only one left for another bullock to be tethered. Unable to bear his accursed existence any longer the old man one day closed his eyes and pretended that he was dying. He also simulated a hiccup. This was what the cruel sons were waiting for. They did not lose any time in preparing a bier. Too depressed and weak as the old man was, he did not protest being put on it. But when his body was being tied to the bier and when the sons were lifting it to carry him to *Chaumathu ghat* (one of the bathing ghats of the Ganga), old Bhagirath, mortally afraid of what was happening to him, made a feeble protest and the sons also heard it. But good riddance being good riddance, they drowned the old man's feeble mumblings in their shouts of '*Ram nam satya hai*' (praised be the name of Lord Rama). And thus the sons brought their Bhagirath to the '*Bhagirathi teer*' (the bank of river Ganga) and started giving him holy dips in the freezing cold waters of the river. After the first dip the old man addressed his plea to Ajay,

the first son, and said: 'I am shivering with cold.' After the second dip the old man requested his second son to take him to the dry bank, and after the third he called out Sanjay to wrap him in a warm blanket. After that the old man's teeth chattered with cold and he lost his consciousness. The sons hurriedly put his inert body on the pyre which was lit in no time. However, with the soothing heat of fire, old Bhagirath once again revived and opened his mouth to say something, but before any word could come out of it, alert Ajay had thrust a burning stick into it.

*Babak Samskar* tells of horrifying cruelty and patricide, of selfishness and rapacity of the most heinous kind. It also testifies that Jha owns the credit for writing one of the cruellest of tales in Maithili. To many the treatment of selfishness and cruelty in this story might appear unsavoury and too inhuman to be true. Nevertheless, it should be borne in mind that the story is concerned more with the hostility of new generation writers against the old than just about filial ingratitude. It is made evident in the concluding sentence of the story:—"After the twelfth-day rites, the first thing that the seven brothers did was to get their own names entered in place of their father's in the documents of property. With the ebullience and vigour of certain over-enthusiastic litterateurs of the new generation."

If we read the story in this light we are sure to grasp its symbolic intent, and to take the *baba*-figure not merely as a father-image but also as a symbol of the literary tradition of past days. Such a reading is also corroborated by the writer's bitter personal experiences which made him unhappy with young Maithili writers who not only envied his popularity but also considered him an obstacle to their path of recognition as great writers. The barest in expression and the most compressed in style, the story has Biblical simplicity and is more ironically tragic than the story of Job.

The last story *Dwadas Nidan* (Twelve Remedies) is somewhat different from the rest of the collection, as here the author comes out of Mithila and devotes himself to examine some problems facing the nation at large. An attack on bureaucrats and political high-ups, it makes a satirical exposure of high-level committees



for public welfare constituted to discuss the basic problems of people and to suggest a remedial programme. The members gathered from far-off places, discuss all the socio-politico-economic problem—whatsoever conceivable under the sun, from price-rise corruption, hoarding and black-marketing, population and food-problem, family planning, agriculture and animal husbandry, poverty and unemployment, education, industry to trade and commerce. But as it turns out, the discussion proves nothing more than mere exchange of empty words leaving the problems just where they lay. The discrepancy between precept and practice becomes painfully apparent here when the lunch is announced, the rich and dainty items on the menu make a mockery of their professed concern for poverty and food problem. The whole affair appears clear that all they are interested in is the travelling allowances and not public welfare. The announcement of a new date for further discussions within next fifteen days further confirms their mercenary designs. The title *Dwadas Nidan* carries in this context an ironical overtone. For, it is no remedy but a status quo that is ultimately achieved.

The story has a deep contemporary relevance and an enormous power within its brevity. If on the one hand it makes us pathetically aware of how we are being constantly duped by our chosen representatives, on the other it also fills us with anger and disgust for their double-facedness. Committed writers in different languages have written a lot on hypocrisy and hollowness of the establishment and Jha unfolds it objectively and dispassionately. The story is left without comment, leaving the readers think what they please. Like the best of his tales it stands apart as a picture and speaks for itself.

## Miscellaneous Writings

A VERSATILE WRITER, Hari Mohan Jha also wrote one-act plays, reminiscences, rambles, skits and sketches as well as poems and parodies with the same accomplishment.

Among his one-act plays, *Ayachi Mishra*, *Mandan Mishra*, *Maharaj-Vijay* (The Victory of the King), *Bauak Dam* (Price of the Son), *Rail-Ka Jhagra* (Quarrel in a Train Journey) are regarded as representative ones. Both *Ayachi Mishra* and *Mandan Mishra*, the main characters in plays of their names, were historical personalities of the 14th and the 8th centuries respectively. The plots have been constructed in the background of legends current with the names of these two personalities.

Ayachi's real name was Bhavanath Mishra. He and his son Samkar Mishra are recognised as men of great scholarship of their times. He was so called because he never solicited any help from any body for his livelihood and never aspired for any material gain. Moreover he was renowned for his generosity and benevolence. When a copper pitcher full of gold-coins was unearthed from his premises, he got it deposited in the state treasury considering it to a public property. And again, when his five-year old son Samkar was presented with a gold necklace by the king as reward for his prodigious poetic talent, Ayachi handed it over to the nurse-maid who had served at the time of his son's birth and to whom Samkar's mother had promised to give her son's first earning as her remuneration. As they had no money at that time for paying off, if had remained overdue to her. It is said that the nurse got a tank excavated with the proceeds of the necklace. The play highlights the same.

Similarly, the plot of *Mandan Mishra* has been evolved from the so called philosophical discourse between Samkar, the Adi Samkaracharya and Mandan, a great Vedic scholar. Samkar was an exponent of *Advait Vedant* which refers to the true spiritual knowledge, and Mandan was a vedic priest who knew all about religious ceremonies and sacrificial rites. Samkar had set out on a journey to propagate his views. When he came to Mithila, the birth-place of Mandan, as it is being claimed in this part of the country, he expressed his desire to have a debate with him. It was mediated by Mandan's wife, Bharati, a lady who possessed an uncommon intellect and had a sound knowledge of scriptures. The great debate continued for eighteen days and Samkar was declared victorious. Mandan was, thus, initiated by Samkar as his disciple and after taking *sanyas* he was given the name of Sureswaracharya.

Both these plays have well-known stories as plots but are usually failures as drama. At the premiere shows, however, the play had been appreciated for their apparent aims which were to remind audience of the glorious past Mithila had.

*Rail-ka Jhagra* is a social comedy based on a contrived device of coincidence. In a marriage negotiation it was a condition that the boy's mother would approve of the girl before making any final settlement. A particular day and place was chosen for the purpose. On the appointed day members from both families boarded the train to reach the destination. The bride was with her mother and a male member. From the other side there was the prospective bridegroom escorting his mother. While the ladies took their seats in a lady's compartment, the males sat separately in two general bogies. Neither of the teams had any prior acquaintance with each other, and were ignorant of each other's identity. In the lady's compartment the girl had a great quarrel with the lady, the prospective bridegroom's mother, for seating accommodation and the same had touched the height of vulgarity. In the meantime the train touched the station where they had to drop. All detrained there and the boy's mother narrated the whole incident to her son pointing at the girl. When both families assembled at the appointed place to carry on the formality, they were surprised at the situation and felt embarrassed for the

unpleasant happening. But both sides were relentless in sticking to their positions. While the prospective bridegroom was in no mood to marry such a quarrelsome girl, the girl too was adamant on not admitting any fault on her part. At this moment the boy's mother played a reconciliatory role and clasped the girl in her arms with love and affection. The agile girl now melted in the warmth of her arms and became extremely docile. The boy's mother comforted her son saying that a quarrel in a train journey was like flames of straw, having a momentary existence. The play ends with the concurrence of affinity. It is full of action and the suspense and curiosity make it enjoyable till the end.

Jha's other plays are farces. In these he has freely indulged in crude and crazy mirth of which he had a great store. His *Maharaj-Vijay* depicts the effeminate nature of a king. The writer has said that he was inspired to write it after reading the Sanskrit drama, *Svapna-Vasavadatta* by classical dramatist Bhasa. In the play the king goes for hunting. A wild buffalo is killed by someone from the cortege, the credit for which, however, goes to the king. To felicitate the occasion 'Bahu Puja' (adoration of the arm) of the king is arranged on behalf of the queen. While the adoration was in progress, a woman wrestler arrived in the city and challenged any man to wrestle with her. The king got the news and himself accepted the challenge and was defeated. The woman wrestler snatched the crown of the king and left the place. It took several months for the king to recover from the humiliation inflicted on him. When fully recovered he again showed his inclination to fight her to take revenge for his earlier defeat. But that woman wrestler was not to be found anywhere. So an effigy of the woman is prepared and the king, in full view of the public, pulls it down and he is declared victorious. The play is written in the familiar idiom of the people. The description of the inner apartment (*antahpur*) is erotic in keeping with the effeminate character of the king. Caricatures are loud though provide the audience with innocent and hearty laughter.

Incongruous situations and behaviours are the sources of mirth in his *Bauak Dam*. The playwright holds up to ridicule the evils of dowry system in the society. A father demands dowry for his son equal to the expenses incurred on him since his birth, and

in this connection furnishes a detailed account to the bride's father. The play reaches its point of climax when a man from bride's side points out two items which appear to have been left out. The first is the cost of milk for the breast-feeding of the child and the second is the compensatory amount for the decline in the youthfulness of the groom's mother in delivering the baby. This has been presented with the help of dramatic exaggeration. The play is satiric, offering the audience rollicking humour.

Hari Mohan Jha introduced a new genre in the form of *Bhola Babak Gappa* which appeared in a series in periodicals of the time. Some of these were later collected in his book named *Charchari*. These are interesting pieces of gossip, usually called *gappa*, which cover different aspects of the transitional social life of the region. *Gappa* is a typical Maithili word which hardly has an exact English equivalent. *Gappa* may mean a white lie or a story based on some half-truth. In common parlance, however, *gappa* is also a piece of information but a *gappi* is invariably one who is known for weaving incredible yarns. Every village or a close-knit community has its quota of individuals who specialise in talking interesting lies or *gappa*. A village *Chaupal* or winter camp-fires (*ghoor*) in a village would be most dull without a *gappi*. There is no fixed agenda in a *gappa* session and hardly remains any coherence there between topics. A *gappi* has to be an interesting conversationalist, one who, by his style, must be able to hold the attention of his audience.

In *Bhola Babak Gappa*, Hari Mohan Jha uses 'gappa' (gossip) as a vehicle of light social satire. *Bhola baba* is a village wiseacre and a recognised *gappi* representing the older generation. He boasts of men and manners of bygone days as being superior to those of the contemporary times and thereby proves his point. Satirical in overtone and humorous in approach, the stories are exaggerations par excellence. Some of the themes covered by these *interesting lies gappa* are about the practice of offering formal apology to guests called *uchiti*, upholding of established family practices called *maryada*, caste elitism called *panji pratha* and the excess of formality called *tirhutam*. Besides these, there are many humorous descriptions as comedy of manners. *Bhola Baba* regales his audience with interesting lies. When a listener raises a butt he

goes shooting at it with an anecdote appropriate to the point in question. Thus it goes on and on like a magician materialising a never-ending paper-chain from his mouth.

In conception of form and creation of the main character, *Bhola Babak Gappa* and *Khattar-Kaka-Ka Tarang* belong to the same genre. In fact, *Khattar kaka* and *Bhola baba* are literary twins performing the same function in the same style though on different levels of experience. The essential difference is: whereas *Khattar kaka* is a veteran logician, having easy access to Sastras and literatures which he can quote to assert his statement, *Bhola baba* is a garrulous talker, gifted with practical intelligence knowing everything around him. He has a natural skill to produce the desired effects through intuition. *Khattar kaka* generally keeps himself confined to his time, and touches upon topical themes to make fun of, has quick perception on contemporary life and problems. Some of *baba's* stories, sound too incredible to be true. But keeping in view the satiric motive, more marvellous the 'lie' the better comes out the chance of a giggle turning into a guffaw. Thus, when someone from the audience complains about the infestation of the bed-bugs, *Baba* says that these bed-bugs are smaller than those of the past which were as big as his snuff-box. Talking about the devoutness of the people of the past *baba* tells that there was a devotee of God he knew who would start fanning his Shaligram (A piece of chiselled and shining stone, worshipped as Lord Vishnu) the moment he himself perspired with heat.

Hari Mohan Jha's poetic genius was apparent from the very beginning. He seems to have imbibed enough of his poet-father's natural talent for poetry. Although dedicated purely to prose never he stopped writing poems, all his life. His poetic output, though not meagre, is yet to be collected in the form of a book. These poems are mostly narrative in form based upon the social life of the time. As a satirist he found ample material for ridicule in the society infected with many evils and superstitions. Some of his humorous poems when recited in poetic gatherings, had brought laurels for him. The language is plain with novel analogies, images and symbols.

Jha's last work was his *Jivanyatra* (Life's Journey)—his autobiography—which was published posthumously. It is the only

autobiography of its kind in the language. "Neither confessional in nature nor ambitious, it is, however a truthful valuable account of the life of a great litterateur of Maithili."<sup>1</sup> Besides his personal life the book offers a lively description of the contemporary times. The inherent quality in him to create humour is reflected in every page, except in the appendix on his wife which is a piece replete with pathos of a very personal nature. The book which contains many iridescent pictures from the social life of the time is also important for its realistic documentary values. The style of the book is as interesting as it is in his other writings. The language has its usual finesse.

Though Hari Mohan Jha gained literary honours all through his life he could not acquire a house of his own. In this context he said: "In my search for 'Plots' for my stories I never cared to purchase a 'Plot' of land to construct a house." His pun on 'Plot' is remarkable and such instances stand out as a distinguishing feature of his language.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. "Ramakant Mishra, A Literary Giant", *Indian Literature*, No. 115, Sept. - Oct. 1986, p. 115.

## Post-Script

HARI MOHAN JHA has been the most widely read author for the last fifty years and, till his death in 1984 he had no peer among contemporary writers. Nothing has altered this evaluations up-to-date. No writer of Maithili was admired and adored as much, and none ever came so close to the heart of the Maithili reading public as did he. With little or no apprenticeship, he had entered the literary world and proved himself a full-fledged author. The publication of his very first book, *Kanyadan* had become wildly popular. He created literary genres of his own craft to enrich his mother-tongue with rare distinction. All his book are modern Maithili classics and the clamour for the same continues unabated. He is considered an all-time great of Maithili.

Hari Mohan Jha has been called *Hasyarasawatar* (An Incarnation Of Humour) and also *Vyangya Samrat* (Monarch of Wit). He has said of himself that the supreme playwright, God, had destined him to play the role of a comedian, as it is commonly held, that his talent lay in only humour and satire. But this view is only partially true because as we know that Jha's talent as a writer was multi-dimensional. He combined laughter with seriousness.

A unique personality is often misunderstood and so was the case with Hari Mohan Jha. He has been blamed for his obsession of finding fault with some of the most sublime and noble aspects of our culture and he has also been censured for shaking our confidence in values enshrined in our scriptures. But Jha's writings reflect only educated reactions of a new empirical order of society based on logic and science, in their fight again old and superstitious order of the society. Jha had to dig deep for pulling



out the roots of orthodoxy. It is in his zeal for exorcising the 'voodoo' aspects of religious beliefs and practices, from the minds of his people that he applies the shock treatment of critical dissection of our scriptures. His orthodox critics generally forget that Jha was a compulsive humorist and most of his critical aspersions had a satiric motive. This attitude allowed him a freedom of spirit to evaluate a thing in a purely detached and dispassionate manner. He poked fun at many a social evil of his time and never felt any compunction in criticising or condemning what he did not find in consonance with the spirit of the modern times.

However, his readers, never objected to Jha's trenchant attacks on social evils and mindless rituals. On the other hand they loved him for it. Once assured of his readers' love, the artist in Jha never looked behind to think over such attacks. As we know the great Saratchandra also had to face somewhat the same situation. Like him Jha too was a writer of fiction, first and last, and if in the wake of discharging his artistic duties he raised a problem or criticised anything it was only to stimulate his readers' mind. It was not for him to assume the role of a social reformer outside the realm of art, not for him to sermonise like a preacher.

Hari Mohan Jha gave Maithili prose a proper form. He freed it from its Sanskritised style and, thus, brought it nearer to common man's speech. His prose has a chiselled urbanity and, though he used figures of speech for creating humour and satire, it is not rhetorical. One finds a natural flow in his compositions which vibrate with life and vigour. The use of familiar and typical idioms lend his language a savour of the soil. His brilliant puns and retorts have passed into memorable quotations.

Jha's humour, both purely verbal or situational is never sardonic or saturnian. His ratiocinative wit, the penchant for pun, the infectious sense of humour and his uncanny command over language dazzle his readers with their brilliance.

Since he did not treat Hindu scriptures as a 'sacred cow' many accused him of being an atheist. But on a close look it will come out that if there were a few those days who really knew the meaning of 'Dharma' or religion he was one of them. He had, however, no love lost for priests and *pandas*. Like Bankimchandra,

he held a balanced view with regard to religion and its social relevance. He was neither a blind traditionalist showing a slavish adherence to conventional view of religion nor an unthinking rebel denouncing the scriptures in the name of modernity. Far from taking cudgels for scriptures, he rather took to flay them whenever he found any incongruities in them or inconsistencies. But it does not mean that he was blind to the novelty of our spiritual heritage which he always prized as a treasure. In respect of religion as anything else he was a liberal humanist determining its propriety on the basis of the humanistic ends it served.

## APPENDIX

### Extracts from *Jeevan-Yatra*

IN THE MEMORY of my childhood, there stands out a trinity—Daiya, Bahin Dai and Mai.

Daiya was my grand-mother, eighty years old. She was familiar with the legends from *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat*. She would narrate the days when Amar Singh and Kunwar Singh had fought with the British; when the first railway train had steamed in and people from far and near had gathered to see the scene; when kerosene had first reached a village and how Jagua, the servant of the family, had come forward to light a lantern. Its flame had leapt up to an arm's height and he had to flee for life. She would tell how tall and mighty was her father Chandramani Kumar, how magnificent was his *haveli*, and how she used to lord over her seven brothers. While she recounted all these, her eyes would light up with the pride of a princess.

Bahin Dai, a widowed daughter of Daiya, was my paternal aunt, my father's sister. She had come back Ranti, her marriage place, to serve Daiya. Like Daiya, she always kept herself engrossed in worship and prayer, austerity and fasting and other such activities which were spiritual and religious in nature. Every day, after taking an early bath, she would pour water on the holy basil and chant mantras.

Mai, my mother, was a pundit's daughter. She was greatly proficient in manners and mores, rites and rituals of Mithila. She knew doing *alpanas* and the ornamental painting of vases, making fine sacred threads and very fine chipping of chewing nuts. Maidens of the village would crowd around her to learn the *sikki* craft and also the songs of various nature like Tirhut, Nachari,

Maheshvani, Samdaun, etc. Mai would sing *vihag* in her melodious tone. Ladies from the locality used to get their letters written or read to them by her. She could read the almanac (*patrah*) and would tell about *Ekadashi*, the eleventh day of every fortnight sacred to Vaisnav. She was called the *Pandityne*, a learned lady or a *pandit's* wife.

When I cast a bird's eye view on the life of my father, I am rather amazed. Having lost his father when a mere child and dependent upon his maternal uncle and also deprived of means to get admitted to a school, how come that a village boy, got the blessings of Saraswati, the Goddess of Learning, that he shined as a star in the literary firmament? During that period, when Hindi prose was still in its formative stage, and when Hindi of Bihar was being ridiculed, my father set such a standard of chaste Hindi that a person like Mahavir Prasad Dwivedi, being impressed, recognised him as a writer of his own category. He never learnt Bengali from anybody but translated best Bengali works, that is, novels of Bankimchandra, Tagore etcetera into Hindi and enriched the language, which hitherto had not been done by anyone. He had not learnt Brajbhasa, but like the poets of *Riti* period in Hindi literature, became renowned for his accomplished poems.

He had not attained any statutory degree in Sanskrit, yet he composed an epic in nineteen cantos delineating the family history of the king of Giddhaur. Genuine language of his village was the same which is now being called Vajjika, but he had the credit of being the first novelist of Maithili. What should be said about all these? Hereditary attributes or supernatural benediction?

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Once a Brahman, he was socially excommunicated. He was charged with ploughing land with his own hand, stealthily at night. The services of the village barber and the washermen were denied to him. But there was no eye-witness to this act and the accusation could not be proved. Yet, he remained an outcaste. A great excitement prevailed upon the village. And then Pandit

Kishori Jha of Chiknauta was called in. He came followed by a human load of sacred texts.

After hearing both sides, Panditji gave his verdict. The Brahman had to atone for the sin since he had earned public censure. He had, therefore, to get his *tika* (*sikha*—a lock of hair on the crown of one's head) severed in ritual atonement and had to feed persons with fifty-one seers of cooked rice. It was only after that he was declared pure. Such was the austerity of social discipline in those days.

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A scene from village *panchayat*—the court of five—of those days would be difficult for people to believe at present. The *panchas*, the *jury*, were seated on a specious verandah. All were in a serious mood, as if, some shocking peril had fallen on the society. In the middle a tiny piece of paper was kept. A member of the jury explained: "The situation has been saved since the letter was intercepted here itself otherwise what a misfortune it would have!" Another man who had a high turban over his head supported the view by saying: "No doubt! In that case the head of the entire village would have hung in shame. Now some precaution is needed so that no girl dares to do a thing like this."

The fact was that a newly married girl had written a letter to her husband. Hiding the same in the corner of her sari, she was going to drop it in the letter-box. One of the members of the jury detected it and produced it before the *panchayat*. The girl had gone into hiding. Her father was summoned and fined twenty-five seers of chewing nuts. The schooling of the girl was stopped thenceforth.

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In those days, feasts were regularly arranged in honour of *pandits* at Kankali temple on behalf of Darbhanga Raj. While the

preparations for the feast were in progress, the *pandits* would discuss any topic of interest.

Once there was a discussion on female education. The subject was, whether education should be imparted to girls or not. Arguments were placed from both sides. Finally it was decided that girls should be allowed schooling till the age of ten, not beyond that. The decision was signed by the oldest *Mahamahopadhyay*.

In the same way, a meeting was held to protest against Sharada bill. One speaker commented: "If a girl remains unmarried till the age of fourteen years, what remains with her? If Shastras have any validity, her father will have to put up with a bad fortune. That Sharada must have been unchaste herself and now likes to corrupt others."

Some one from the gathering interrupted—"Sharada (Harvilas) is not a female, but a male."

The former speaker became more excited—"Then discuss it. When there is a feminine suffix with the name, how come the person is a male?"

Now the discussion shifted from religious text to grammar.

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When all the rites and rituals of *chaturthy* (The four-day ordeal) were over, at midnight the *bidhikari* (Bride's maid) pushed the bride into *kobarghar* (the nuptial chamber) and retreated. The bride had shrunk like a *Lajvanti* creeper (a sensitive plant). After a great effort on my part, she broke her silence. I could now know that her name was Subhadra and she had passed out from the girls' school of the village securing a scholarship for further studies. She had received a prize, a book entitled *Kanya Subodhini*, from the hands of the school inspector.

What more would one converse with an innocent, eleven-year-old baby bride? I started snoring without any irritation and

did not know when, in the early hours of the morning, she had slipped out of the room after unbolting the door.

In the morning, the room was filled with the sweet smell of newly blown *kadamb* flowers. The *Bidhikari*, freshly bathed, was standing near my bedstead, with a trace of soft smile on her lips and a bunch of flowers in her hand. She had read my mind and had started tutoring me like a *muni kanya* (a girl from hermitage): "At present, she is a mere child. How much time will a bud take to blossom? There shall be the *dwiragaman* after three years. By that time she would be in her prime of youth. At present you, too, are a student. So, devote yourself to studies and exercise austerity. One day you will get the price. A tree its own time to bear fruit."

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After fifty years, I have again come back to Darbhanga to pass my remaining days on my own soil. Sweet memories of the past have drawn me here. But after my arrival I could not find the familiar Darbhanga of those days. The city seems to be unknown. I thought of going to see the Naya Bazar (the new market) where I had lived with my father. I went there and moved from one end to the other, but the houses of my days were not there. Time's levelling machine had pulled them down turning the place into a straight and plain road. There was nothing of that name, not even a sign of the past. I sat there for a while, with my hands over my forehead.

I have come to Darbhanga to convalesce, with the temptation of getting milk and mangoes. In the early morning, I sent my servant with a rupee and a pot to bring one *paua* (quarter of a seer) of milk. In 'those' days sixteen seers of milk could be had for a rupee. The servant came back empty handed. At last he brought it in a cup from a tea stall for 1.25 paise. In those days, twenty five mangoes of *Maldah* variety were sold for a rupee. But now not even one fair sized mango was available at that cost. He brought two mangoes for rupees two at the rate of rupees six per kilo.

Within these fifty years the prices have registered an increase of fifty times. Can any economist give a proper answer to this question?

That Darbhanga does not exist now. At that time parents were alive, now they have died. Terms like 'Mummy' and 'Papa' have devoured them. Earlier, children were taught *Sa Te Bhavatu Suprita* - (the Goddess Parvati may be kind to us), now we hear from them *Mummy Ko Papa Se, Papa Ko Mummy Se, Pyar Ho Gaya, Pyar Ho Gaya*, (Mummy and Papa have fallen in love with each other).

I remember pondering, where have I come to? and why? Is it the same Darbhanga where I had lived fifty years ago? No, that Darbhanga is no more. Its soul had died. What is left now?

In the mean time I heard female voices, pouring nectar into my ears,

I was born in distress  
Passed my days in distress  
Happiness never came even in dream  
O' Bholanath! the supreme Lord!!

This is the same song which my mother used to sing. No, our culture is not dead. While these ladies are alive the soul of our culture would never die. I would pass my last days peacefully in their midst.



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