

From Nanpur to London : Prafulla Mohanti : The Painter of Signs

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Nanpur, a remote village, in Jajpur district of Odisha, stands on the fertile bank of the river Birupa, a tributary of the Mahanadi. The village is 55 miles south west to Bhubaneswar, the capital city and 33 mile south-west to Cuttack the main city of the State. The land is flat with the open paddy fields separating the village which are hidden behind mango groves and palm trees. Small hills beautify the areas adjoining the village rising directly out of the ground. The soil is alluvial and fertile. The climate is tropical.

Houses having mud walls and thatched roofs rise clustering in a ground and each house is divided with small rooms for privacy and shelter from the sun. All the mud walls look artistic when the housewives decorate the walls and floors with rice paste for festivals or ceremonies. Different pictures of birds, fruits, vegetables, deities, gods and goddesses are drawn beautifully that could easily watch the attention.

All the villagers are the Hindus who follow the caste system strictly. Religion is the life in the village but it is a curious combination of beliefs and superstitions. The village consists of six settlements, each one belonging to one caste. People are very hospitable and god-fearing. Everybody respects the village deity Mahalia Bhudha and his help is sought in the time of crises.

The river Birupa gives life and identity to the village. It is a meeting place for the villagers, who use it for bathing and washing. On its way to the Bay of Bengal, it meets the river Brahmani.

In this village Nanpur, the writer and painter Prafulla Mohanti was born in 1936 to Bipra Charan Mohanti and Ramadevi. Finishing his primary and High School in the village, he went to Berhampur for College education. During 1955-60 he studied architecture in Sir J.J. School of Arts, Bombay and won a scholarship to study town planning at Leads colleges of Arts in U.K. which proved to be the turning point in his life.

After obtaining a diploma in town planning, Prafulla Mohanti worked as an architect-planner with a greater London Council from 1965 to 1970, but gave up job to devote himself to creative art. He has been living in London since 1956 visiting Odisha and India every year dividing his time between painting and writing.

The village environment, as Prafulla Mohanti believes made him a painter. When he picked up the mud chalk at the Chatasali of the village Abadhan to draw three circles as Brahma, Bishnu and Maheswar as the beginning of his education, his painting skills developed. In his later life, he could realize how the repeated practice of drawing circles on the ground helped him not only to draw good pictures, but also develop good handwriting both in Odia and English. The rising and setting sun defusing crimson colour in the sky stirred the imagination of the child Prafulla Mohanti who could find the vermilion spot on the forehead of his mother similarly related to them. The vermilion spot on the forehead of his mother was similar to him to the setting and rising sun. This

scenario-stirred him to imitate the same in the mud walls with his clay chalks. He went on drawing different pictures on the walls of his house that he came across in his village. The bathing women in the river, worshipping of the village deities, returning of birds to their nests in the evening, the home-ward movement of cattle at dusk etc. could be drawn excellently and lively during his childhood on the mud walls of his house. Such activities gave enough indications that child Prafulla will be a famous painter in future.

Time was waiting for him in Bombay for his growth as an artist and to blossom into a legend as a writer in London. When he reached London everything to him was new and awkward. He has narrated those details in his "Through Brown Eyes". In Bombay, he for the first time, was separated from his village and could realize the depth of his love for it (village). Though he was living far from his village, mentally he was in it and he went on painting the walls of his hostel room in the rice paste that was painted on the occasion of the festive seasons in the village. He reminisced every occasion and each person of his village and painted many pictures relating to it (village) which he exhibited in London.

He was fortunate to get scholarship for higher studies in Leads in London. He sailed to London with much speculation and when he reached there, he found everything strange and opposite to India. It was very difficult to adapt though he was staying with Tom who was his bosom friend in Bombay. The manners, dress, food, relationship and everything were different. When Tom's mother greeted him saying "Good evening", he wondered and thought how could it be evening when the sun was still in the sky to set? Food was served to him with spoon but the dish and its utensils were strangers to him. He thought how to take food before starting eating. He could not sleep comfortably due to the softness of the bed and started meditating. Unknown himself he fell fast asleep only to wake up to the chirp of bird at dawn.

London was totally a new land for him. He came here for higher studies but his mind was wandering in his village, though his body was in London. He could not forget a minor incident of his native place and could not adapt himself to the culture and circumstances of the London life. In the cool night, he went on reminiscing his lost childhood and passing of late nights listening to beautiful stories from his grand mother and mother. Now, he is realising the significance of the stories that have been verbally transmitted from one generation to another. He writes all the stories he had heard from his grandmother and mother in his famous "Village Tales". After that the world knows how Indian women are the best story tellers though they were illiterate. The didactic stories told by the Indian women to their children and grand children while lulling them to sleep in night reveals the artistic talent of the village illiterate women.

Before going to England, he heard many things about the land which attracted him. But when he reached there, he found the land barren in personal relationship. He seemed to lose his entity in such a vast metropolitan city. Finding river Thems extremely polluted, he longed for the river Birupa which is a meeting place for the village people. In parks, grown up boys and girls sat close by close and were seen kissing and hugging each other. In Indian village or in town boys and girls are rarely seen talking each other which is strictly forbidden. Sound pollution, hello hai relationship, artificial life and manners, secondary relationship among the neighbours made him to escape to his own village from the fast life of London.

He immortalized this love for his village, Nanpur through painting and writing, may be to escape from the hedonistic London and to tread in the world of his village. He started **My Village, My Life**, simply narrating each incident, events, persons, occasions and village culture in which he was closely related. The village characters and

their personal accounts are so pathetic and disturbing that they could be only realized. The writer mixed and interviewed his villagers and narrated their levels of pathos and pain which have been filmed by BBC. Most important things of my village my life is the description of the village crafts and their sun-setting movements due to the development of industrial goods which are flooding the nearby markers of Nanpur as a result the village craftsmen – potter, carpenter, Ironsmith, weaver, oil man, goldsmith are gradually losing their jobs and importance in the village. Agriculture often falls in the mouth of flood and famine driving innocent people into penury.

Due to development of industries and town, the village life undergoes a radical change. Those who stay in town and come back to the village temporarily excited the people to follow them. The geography of the village changes due to developmental activities sponsored by government. Road, communication, electricity, pucca houses, piped water, tube-well have changed the village which Prafulla Mohanti narrates in detail in **Changing Village, Changing Life**. Nanpur is being changed geographically as the National Highway No.-5 passes through it dividing the village into two small hamlets. Small town Balichandrapur near the village has grown up into a being town bringing all the consuming facilities replacing the house into consuming units instead of producing ones. The rising industrial and urban model of life has brought about a change in the level of thought of the village people.

The impact of western culture was found only in the big town in past, but now the village people are bring westernized in their way of life. Joint families have been reduced to nucleus family, the natural village man has been replaced into an artificial man in manners and thought. The spiritual values are gradually being eroded by the thought of materialism. Emotional attachment is being replaced by rationalized relationship.

When Prafulla Mohanti went to London the village sanctity was there in Nanpur. He wants the same to be maintained and it should be continued for a natural living in the lap of nature. He comes every year to Nanpur in winter and stays in his village for two months. He is shocked to find that his loving village is gradually being westernized losing its natural village flavour under the surge of an alien culture for which he comes from London every year being suffocated in its atmosphere.

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