

PORTRAITS

P C K PREM

He is a difficult man. He knows it. If you happen to meet him, it is disgusting. You shake hand and it sends tremors. If you talk to him, a foul smell fills nostrils. If you walk with him, he irritates with lofty thoughts you never heard. If he looks into the eyes, many suns seem to take birth. You want to commit suicide, for he is unbearable. You wish to speak but eerie feelings deter you from indulging in wishful talks. Even knowledge of genetics defeats you. You fail to assuage feelings of anachronous existence when you realize he stands near. He appears tall and stilts growth of people around. You cannot be apathetic and so you feel wretched. If he is lighthearted at times, profanity in language distorts innocuous intent and he appears blasphemous and silly. It is a firsthand knowledge one gathers when one interacts with him. He is loudmouthed and sarcastic. He is also a saint and that is an enigma. I do not know why I introduce a strange man to you but remember in outlandish and weird conduct is hidden the secret of life. I wanted to know everything about him and it was not a sting operation.

Bose recalled each word vividly while the police officer stood aghast.

“Why did you chase?”

“I wanted to understand you. People say many things about you.”

“That is expected of a media person. A curiosity to know, which is just not very special but because it is masked so a journalist snoops and scoops without aim and purpose, and do you think I do not know that a newspaper did not only employ up but a private...” He was quiet but domineering, “Chandra, times are different so I am, and people like me are also changed.”

Chandra stood stupefied. He looked up. He was black and then suddenly invisible hands painted him white. He appeared as cool as a moon. Chandra saw numerous dragons invading imagination. He was grotesque as if. Next moment, he appeared a great sage, who was worried about the future of humanity. Chandra felt as if octopus like fangs had strongly held him captive. Charvak stood before him like a giant, laughing and sneering and then, tenderly mollicoddling the little pen pusher. Chandra felt very small.

“I am a saint. Not a floozy or a strumpet I tell you. You people generally believe. However, those matters need different time and location. I hold the reigns...a huge populace needs proper stretching and...sex is not a weakness. It is like power-fulcrum I say.” Charvak’s pan-chewed teeth and red muck spitting mouth appeared obnoxious. He went to the washroom of the airport and returned after ten minutes. Chandra, after a dawdling of a few seconds stood in front of Charvak with a few questions.

“You never stop asking. It is routine but dull duty. How long you can hold secrets. It is difficult to believe a media man with a snooty nose.” Chandra stared in wonder as to why should he harbour silly and disparaging ideas. He was never imposing. After all, in life, everyone earns a living. Chandra nourished a belief that no one was honest and when thoughts assaulted with a sharp edged knife, he was flustered and saddened. To carry such thoughts could not make anybody happy he learnt. He wanted to run away from mind’s perversions and despicable thoughts. Chandra thought he burdened a free mind and the idea struck hard. He stood languishing as if. He smelt around, and realized that the fellow was not an angel.

“I want a cup of coffee. In another half an hour, I shall go...I have to change...I foresee many people with garlands. Down-and-outs support, for they do not know where we stand. You know and so it is play of words. You know it goes with life.”

Chandra did not foster gusto and eagerness. He knew Charvak is correct and did not conceal anything. To live with harsh truths of pretense in public life offered an integrated view of life. A dangerous game they play, Chandra thought and he was not an exception. A puppet’s dance more lethal and bloody continues without apparent indications but here, an ogre holds a dragnet and controls the ugly vaudeville in life. Chandra thought over when Charvak held his hand and told, “Sometime, one wants to be alone. Here, people do not know so it is good to loiter, eat, and smoke and...” He gave out a sinister smile, “Come on, let us sit in a room.” Chandra looked at the watch. Still enough time it was to do a job.

“Don’t you think you know us? Is there any need to know more?” It was a decently furnished room. The officer bowed, and appeared exited after ordering for coffee. He was relaxed as he took out a cigar and said, “I do not consider vituperation or invectives are required. People are immune. People abuse, condemn but follow. A secret thread of love keeps an unholy alliance intact.” He looked deep into Chandra’s eyes.

“Why did you wish to...?”

“I do not anoint...I do not trust in anodyne ideals. It is a facade. In mast, lives survive. It is good for you. It is not an archaic idea. Right from the times of Confucius or Chanakya, the tradition continues. Unscrambling or decoding existing mechanism of governance is unethical.” Chandra stood aghast. Charvak stretched legs on the huge glass table pushing the tray to one side, then was conscious and so stood up, placed the cup on the table, rushed to close the door a little, drew curtains, returned and settled again with stretched legs as usual. Chandra understood and kept sipping coffee.

“Nice coffee...” He took a biscuit and offered one to Charvak.

“It is great feat.”

“In today’s world, media behaves like mafia. Do you know how?”

“Big houses begin sooner or later with new variety reporting. It is wielding a double-edged weapon. You control power and...” He laughed. Chandra blankly looked on. He felt upset. While he gathered up flaccid spirits to build up an argument, Charvak said, “You must cultivate alliance either with one business mogul or...get eliminated. Now, most of big business magnets manage to enter the parliament...that is a mystery. If you think parliament is of the people...you are mistaken. It is of the rich people...who create a solid base of poor parliamentarians to...you know...I am not alone. I get fat salary. Poor of the country spend millions of...and you talk of amelioration. A silly idea it is. I know a huge amount has gone into...you want to get rich very soon.” He threw a questioning look.

Chandra was astonished at the remarks but kept genial looks intact. For a couple of minutes, they sat mutely but stared at each other. Chandra felt guilty.

“If you think of soul and conscience...never think of unearthing secrets. In our case, even the highest investigation agency fails. It constitutes human frailties. How would you prove I stashed money in a foreign bank...it is difficult. What is law? I make law...I mean I, with many shadows sit and...power and money make law not the general people. It is a classic case of hoodwinking. I am realistic. Here is secreted the hopes and failures of life. In this, life sustains.”

Charvak appeared a bit rough but maintained a jovial posture. Chandra realized that this class of people, without notice tries to become mystic in approach. An aura of implicit greatness and sagacity however proves disastrous in the end. Possibly, he was utterly mistaken. He fixed eyes on a creamy complexion but eyes looked too overbearing to permit a gawky stare.

At that moment, Charvak appeared extremely handsome and strong. Any woman could fall for him and if he had a few flirt occasions, it was natural. He remembered terrible days of lusty murder. He shuddered and felt invisible drops of perspiration irritating. Guilt perturbed Chandra. He was thirty-five at that time. Charvak was somewhere near in late forties. Chandra spent more than a decade in the media, and Charvak became an accomplished player on the chessboard of politics where he adhered to principles of self-interest in perpetuity.

As a young journalist, he wanted to rise in life and ethical quality of life hardly disturbed. In the heart somewhere, he knew he sinned. Charvak was quite intimate with the family of a senior police officer and so was Chandra. Once, a young daughter of the police officer stayed with him while on way to join a medical college. Charvak became weak and Chandra pandered to lowly tastes not knowing the full import. They drank, danced and raped the young girl and murdered her, and later on, the body was bundled off in a carpet and was thrown in the river. He trembled at the thought.

The tall officer entered. Charvak understood and moved to board the flight to Bombay. Chandra, it seemed underwent searing disappointment without rhyme or reason. Something within agitated and probably past began to haunt. He was also a party to the ugly incident where he was involved in the murder of an innocent girl. Nothing happened. It was a social compulsion to avoid a scandal at the highest level, he thought and perhaps now, people at the helm of affairs are used to burying deep scams, which stain life and interests and that is ethical living they think.

He felt disorientated. Ironically, he often visited ugliness of life many a time and still thought he was impeccable in conduct like Charvak –a thought cut off from the reality of life. An editor of a newspaper asked him to write a detailed article on the person, he was following, for soon the great man, the political pundit predicted, was going to occupy the highest post.

He remembered the words, “Chandra, it is image building. He helped us. If you do now, you will achieve what you never thought of...and yes, I told him you will be the editor-in-chief next time with a seat in the upper house.” Chandra’s facial expressions changed at once as the thought made him forget what transpired. Chandra recalled the sane counsel that it is wisdom to ignore ugly image of politics because it does not give joy and would not cheer up anyone in future. No one really was conscious of the ultimate end - a fistful of ashes or a measured chunk of a trench that would eventually guzzle up a man. Malice and ugliness lead to more murky acts, and the nemesis is terrific he thought again.

It was an exclusive arrangement. They consumed liquor, enjoyed lot of flirting time with the young lady-hosts of the craft, and he was absorbed in each moment. Charvak was a good man but soon he learnt the art of life and enjoyed more in the dark areas of acts and he was secure as many conduits fed him. Interestingly, he was also a channel and now, Chandra was not different.

Those three hours were terrific and mentally unbearable, for past intertwined with present never offered a clear image of future. He had gone into the thought and psyche of public men. He also analyzed self. It was journey quite enjoyable but...he demurred many a time without reaching a winding-up satisfactorily. He closed exhausted eyes. Charvak looked out and asked for a soft drink after gin and lime cordial. Charvak enjoyed drinking like a fish but today he observed restraint. Meeting people at the airport right up to the circuit house was of utmost significance. He was serious about future. Life could not have been so magnanimous. He thought deeply on mechanism, maneuverings, eliminations and going ahead in dangerous times of personal ego and ambitions. Life was beautiful and opening of new horizon re-energized latent and passive desires.

He knew it was impossible to get rid of Chandra whom a senior minister had introduced.

He told, “Chandra is my man. Take care.” On insistent probing, he told, “Ms Chandra is an intimate friend...and I am to see she is happy.” He did not explain further. Once, he had a glimpse of Chandra’s wife. He had not been able to forget the brilliance of eyes and beauty of face. It was a Khilzee like experience but he was not in a position to possess Ms Chandra. He was deliberating on the complexities of relations. Sonority of jarring voices appeared to disturb Charvak. For a few seconds, he felt passionate urges dismantling edifice of restraint. He got up, took a glass of water.

When a charming host moved with a tray, he refused even to look at but threw a slanting glance at the man in almost stupor. He was dozing. Chandra could prove a dangerous man. Media men are not so simple. They look untainted but are not so. He had given an unwilling sarcastic smile, and repulsion filled nostrils. He experienced a sort of squeeze within. He was determined to further self- interests. The editor had assigned a specific job to him to build up his image without an orchestrated exercise.

“Yes, I did a diploma in journalism from Chandigarh, and then underwent a special training in Delhi. I learnt all the communication skills, and journalese is a passion. I worked in a reputed

paper in Delhi and then went to Chennai to work in a national newspaper. I gained expertise in political affairs and now, I devote to national politics. I helped several politicians and bureaucrats, and carried out final changes while editing biographies or auto...I am a ghostwriter for many...for many are very poor in language. He sent me to you with a mission.” He recalled each word and reluctantly but thoughtfully added, “I recall each word. Words I wrote. You know...? How a word or words took birth? Leave it. It is an ancient tale. But a word is an author, a writer and he gives birth to all...words we use, and elevate, downgrade and ...it tells lies and truths. If you love and respect teacher, you must love a word or words. If you do not...you are a cheat, a fucker of values.” Chandra was ironical, sharp and a little angry. Silence appeared uneasy.

“How long it will take...” Charvak did not know what exactly to say and how to react to a strong denunciation. But he went back. While looking at Chandra’s face, he imagined beautiful features of a charming girl. He felt shattered within and thought it was not virtuous. Then, virtues scarcely breathe in the life of netas or babus or...suddenly he returned to the present and again fixed grave-looking eyes on Chandra’s serene face as if. The poor man agreed to...he remembered he assured of a bright future. Man must fall in order to rise in life. Man must know humiliation and disgrace only then he can taste the glory of status.

It is intermingling of different shades of failure facilitating a possible defeat in future. He heard various voices. Sonority of voices left jarring notes around and he was unable to comprehend the unforgiving bewilderment arising out of it. He understood and yet something was inexplicable. Charvak never felt so earlier. Chandra’s past raised many questions of identity and probable existence, which appeared threatened. If he rises and grows without caring for quality life of morals and principles, a likely irredeemable fall would visit him he thought.

“I will accomplish the mission soon.” Words disturbed.

“He knows the subject deeply. A powerful command over the work...he goes into the depths of issues and examines various aspects before writing.” He vividly recalled words of the minister.

“To achieve means a big loss also.”

The minister had told, “Chandra is a subtle operator. He keeps secrets of many. In collecting incriminating papers, footage...he spent money. I financed and ensured safety. None knows that he is the man behind the secret operations. It goes on in politics, in the machinery we use and men, who are close. Love of men does not matter. Loyalty to the power, the chair and

...that is all. Even when you feel the chair is vulnerable, you finish the person even if he is instrumental in making you strong. In politics, nothing is important. No relation and no love or...you must use these as instruments and it is politics in relations. Chandra understands.”

“You taught him...?”

“Yes, he knows when to hit back. It is difficult to defeat Chandra.”

Fears crowded his mind. He called for a cold drink. He looked at the watch. As the host handed over a bottle of cold drink, he threw a smile and asked, “When do we reach?”

He appeared disgusting to the host, a young girl who turned her head, for he looked boorish and lecherous. He stood confronting Charvak.

After a pause, he said, “Only half an hour is left.”

For Charvak, it was difficult to measure the emotional reach of the girl, who was a friend of a business tycoon and who just an hour before, sat very close to Chandra and had whispered juicy words with passion, and obvious expression of love. He was angry for a while. Chandra kept an eye for beautiful things of life.

“Charvak, you must keep Chandra in good humour. You must share certain secrets...it will attract. It is necessary. When you feel he is of no use...better observe distance. But remember I also promised...I think he will stand up but...”

“You are doubtful!”

“No. I thought if we’re not loyal and...expect?” Question was fiercely blunt.

“Why do you say?”

“Charvak, if you married off your young sister to a man of fifty...it was a deal. If I married my son to the drug addict daughter of *cee em*, again, it was an understanding. If a special package to your constituency found allocation in the budget, it was an arrangement. If, out of the projects...” He was quiet for a few seconds, “a certain amount was earmarked for the party and...again a tacit understanding, you recognize. Here, at certain crucial points, we failed, since *babus* also wanted a share of the flesh...here things go wry and doubtful. An issue of collective swindling raises eyebrows.”

“I fail to understand.”

“It is not only Chandra but other friends are party to the deal...and if one screw develops twists... you understand what I say. The whole system collapses.”

“You create fears.”

“I have decided to keep cards close to...” He was silent. When none spoke for a few minutes, he told, “Chandra may exploit or may accept the offer or it is possible enemies give better...in that case you be ready to eliminate.”

A dead silence discomfoted. They drank for a long time.

“Charvak, you are intelligent. It was also deal to keep Chandra in good humour. He understands even the language of eyes...politicians nurse. You say and you do not mean, and you do not say and you convey many things. I say it is a dangerous game. Chandra knows and that is why he writes well.”

“You mean to get rid of ...when he is unwanted.”

“...” He gave a lingering laughter.

“Till you don’t get hold of papers and...it is important.”

Charvak was aghast. Out of the airport after initial, resounding and well-organized welcome, the party men escorted Charvak to the guest house. Chandra was quite busy and checked with important people. He was meticulous in editing each shoot with precision. Brevity and exactness guided Chandra in whatever he did.

“Yes, you keep the record under custody. You may need.”

While entering the room Charvak heard. Out of lethargic curiosity, he asked, “What do you wish to keep in custody?”

“I am with a future...” Chandra gave a hearty laugh.

Before going to the bed at about midnight, Chandra told, “You are highly adored. I am impressed. The editor of the local paper and a national magazine along with media persons of foreign papers came to...I just avoided.”

Charvak did not say a word.

“I have definite news for you. Tomorrow will be a historic day.”

Next day, when Chandra heard persistent knocks at the door, he was angry and when he opened the door, a police commissioner stood before him with a posse of uniformed personnel.

“He is caught with a woman...headlines sealed future. Could we search your room? If you...” Chandra stood speechless.

He came back, took a pack of cigarette and sat on the bed without a word.

BRIEF BIO

An author of more than fifty books in English and Hindi, P C K Prem (p c katoch of Malkher Garh-Palampur, Himachal, a former academician, civil servant and Member HP PSC) post-graduated in 1970. Katoch Prem is a poet, novelist, short story writer, essayist, translator and critic in English from Himachal.