

CHANDRA KUNWAR BARTWAL: THE POET OF PATHOS

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The work of legendary Himalayan poet Chandra Kunwar Bartwal, is indelibly imprinted in the minds of Uttarakhandi intelligentsia with his own personal style. His poetic signature is the blend of multifaceted subject matter of life. Yet he reigns supreme in the world of pathos and nature.

Chandra Kunwar Bartwal was born on 20 August 1919, at Malkoti village in today's Rudraprayag district of Uttarakhand. His father Sh. Bhupal Singh was the headmaster of Anglo-Indian Middle School Nagnath. His mother Smt. Janki Devi was the descendant of Madho Singh Bhandari, a great historical warrior of Garhwal. He got his primary education from Udamanda, High School from Pauri and Intermediate from DAV College, Dehradun. During his stay at Pauri, he had started his literary career by writing few poems including *Navprabhat*. It flourished further during his stay in Dehradun where he composed his master piece *Kaffal Pako* including *Megh*, *Dehradun*, and *Prithvirudan*. He shifted to Allahabad to pursue his BA from Allahabad University in 1937 at the age of 18. There he studied English and Sanskrit literature in depth. Amidst the ill health by the end of 1938, he continued his study and received his BA degree in 1939 and secured admission in MA, in 1941. His health deteriorated further as his illness was diagnosed as tuberculosis which had no cure in those days. From 1941 to 1942, while struggling with his disease, he wrote *Geet Madhavi*, *Veena Nandani*, *Pavas Geet*, *Yam Yashogan*, *Himalaya Kavita* etc. From 1943 to 1947, he lived at Agustmuni and Pawalia. These were the years of his utmost suffering. Tuberculosis was making him feeble and his body was losing strength. He had to spend his last two years (1945-47) in a cowshed and lived an inhuman life. But his disease could not deter him from the path of writing poetry. His most remarkable work *Megh Nandini* (1938-1945) was completed in this period only. Ultimately he died on September 14, 1947 at the unripe age of 28.

Bartwal has many honours to his credit, viz. Follower of Kalidas, Keats and Shelly of India etc. One may feel proud for raising him to such an exalted position. But we may have been doing him an injustice for merely comparing him with great literary personalities of the world. These comparisons lack in bringing out the authenticity or originality of his true genius. Shambhu Prasad Bahuguna has revered him as 'A Poet of Himalayas' (Bartwal 34) which seems appropriate for poet's mastery in portraying the landscapes of snow-clad hills and forests. Dr

Yogambar Singh Bartwal seems to be in tune with Shambhu Prasad Bahuguna to regard Chandra Kunwar Bartwal as ‘Painter of Nature’ (13).

Bartwal’s expertise in evoking pathos in his poetry, remains a less ventured area till now. Estimating his power of delineation to produce feeling of sadness and sympathy, he can be truly regarded as ‘The Poet of Pathos’.

Pathos is the part of a poem which incites feeling of sadness and pity in the minds of readers. Poets use different poetic devices like vivid and concrete language to evoke pathos in skilful way. On the contrary, pathos in the work of Bartwal is less manipulative and more self generated, and natural. It is the spontaneous outcome of agony and tribulations of his life. The infliction of tuberculosis at the blooming age of 20, reduced his body to a skeleton. Amidst the despair of dying, he had a little ray of hope to survive. Realizing his approaching death, his feelings find best expression in the following lines:

Ceasing to flow on, the river (of my life)
 is now flowing back to its source.
 Into a tiny atom is now getting submerged
 my erstwhile earth-sized life.
 Merrily melting slowly in my eyes
 and lighting up my lips with smiles.
 My life slowly ebbing away
 in the beautiful valley. (Joshi 109)

In the above piece ‘lighting up my lips with smiles’ and ‘the river (of my life is now flowing back to its source’, seem to be in contrast to each other; but, in real, a feeling of sadness is generated at the approaching death of the poet, and it becomes more pitiful when poet’s lips smile at it. These lines were an attempt of psychological preparation for the death. Poet would sing these lines while strolling in the verandah (Bartwal 31).

The period of 1939 to 1945 marked a slow and steady decline of Bartwal’s health. As a patient of tuberculosis, he knew well of his approaching death; yet he made a better psychological adjustment to his illness. By writing poetry on his own disease he discovered new ways to make a contribution to literary world.

Too merciless tuberculosis,
 kills body, inflicting pain abound,
 Hate the patient, the frightening people,
 his voice, feeble,
 No visitor,
 dies he perennial,
 Still has patience,
 Dissipated not,
 will to survive. (Bartwal 32)

The way Bartwal, at the age of 20, has precisely delineated his own suffering and forlorn hope, it becomes too hard to control the tears:

Mouth bleeds,
 body emaciated as thorn,
 He should die,

is the wish of all,
 But says he
 in deep-throated roar,
 Carry me to hills,
 May the climate of that
 do some wonder,
 He is despised
 by one and all,
 Asks he for massage
 and sometime for water
 throughout the night,
 How the life is stuck
 in the bony cage,
 is the wonder of one and all,
 Bearing agony unbearable,
 finally dies he,
 Thanks is given to God
 by one and all,
 And having him burnt
 at the bank of Ganges,
 People come home in delight,
 And his remembrance
 is forgotten forever. (Bartwal 32)

In the last years of his life (1945-47), poet was bed ridden. In fact he had foreseen his suffering in the above lines.

Early work of Bartwal is predominated with instinctual desire of the man to love and get loved-a feeling of eros. His eros must not be interpreted as libido- a sexual hunger; it is rather a life force to live, create and sustain life which flows lucidly in the following lines of *Megh Nandini*:

Let me live now
 in the immortal land of love!
 Let me give now
 my all, to get tears few!
 Land of love
 where drops nectar in tears,
 Where untended source
 of nectar sobs!
 Where gods crave to die,
 Let me live now
 in the immortal land of love. (Bahuguna , *Megh Nandini*, Verse1)

Bartwal battled hard with his disease. Still poet's clouds of doubts cast a shadow of sorrow about fulfilling his longings to sustain and survive. The thought prevailing in the following lines justifies it:

Will my night never dawn?

Will all the dreams of these eyes
 turn untrue?
 Will my thorns never meet
 the flowers? (Verse 20)

Above lines don't just portray the doubts of the poet about his survival. They are less 'doubting' and more 'predicting' about his fate. He knew that his thorns (tribulations) would never meet flowers (joy), and his dreams would remain unfulfilled. But still he had hope against hope that his desires would find its way: 'The sound of hope, I listen quietly, The grace of desires, I drink' (Verse 22). His poem 'Just, Shadow of death' evokes sympathy from the readers, where he hopes to live little longer:

Don't let cast just
 the shadow of death over the life,
 Don't let enter the flood of devastation
 into the body and soul,
 Knows who there may be some hope,
 Don't fill tear abundance
 in the heart heavy. (Satish 87)

Pathos which was hitherto prevailing in his desires and hopes, now finds its way in poet's suffering and lamentation. This was the time of suffering an agonizing death. His annoyance to fate that he had been unfairly treated in the hands of death, takes pathos to new heights:

Tree (of my life) had to shed
 in the new spring!
 I had to die
 in the youth blooming!
 When sleep are the people
 of the earth,
 Not a person found
 in the night quiet,
 On the path isolated
 I had to sigh!
 Alas! I had to die
 in the youth blooming. (Bahuguna, *Megh Nandini* , Verse 55)

John Keats once stated that 'If poetry comes not as naturally as leaves to a tree it had better not come at all.' (John Keats letter to John Taylor). Bartwal's poetry fits well into Keats's parameters of poetry. His poetic work is not the outcome of his mental concoction, speculation and artificiality. It is rather the simultaneous overflow of the stream of his heartfelt emotions. 'Rejoicing in the agony abound, doesn't suit now, Submerging of my life, wish my tears now'(Bahuguna, *Megh Nandini*, Verse 57), 'Fate tantalized me for everything in the world' (Verse 60), and 'How far is death, Oh! How far is death' (Satish 70) are his honest lamentations. He is a natural for the poetry.

Contrary to Terror Management Approach where humans cope with mortality by denying their own mortality, and avoiding thinking about it (psychology.com), Bartwal perceives his death and talks about it: 'I saw my death with my own eyes' (Bahuguna, *Megh Nandini*, Verse

62). Same feelings flow in the words of Keats who in his uttermost suffering of tuberculosis wrote to Charles: 'I have an habitual feeling of my real life having past, and that I am leading a posthumous existence'. (Keats's letter to Charles Armitage).

Bartwal's aggressive outburst, after reaching to its height, passes through a process of sublimation now. Around the year of 1944 - 45, poet was almost collapsed and bed ridden. At this point, his greatest achievement is sublimating the impulses of pain and anguish into a constructive defense mechanism. He became religious and believed in supernatural things. Now he finds himself at the feet of Lord: 'Surrendered unto the feet of Lord, when eyes opened' (Bahuguna, *Megh Nandini*, Verse 97). His wish 'If I had learnt your devotion' (Verse 100), his earlier condition that he 'Felt proud to be called atheist' (Verse 105), and now his desire to 'Make this atheist a firm theist, a firm devotee' (Verse 120) are confirmation of his transformation from atheist to theist. Like Milton in 'On His Blindness', Bartwal overcomes his grievances and discontent, and accepts his stage of suffering:

Oh dear Lord,
accept I your decision,
These shackles and prison,
The extreme penetrating pain
slowly slows down now,
Gain only, I
through the suffering and pain,
Oh dear Lord,
accept I your decision. (Verse 104)

The great philosopher Osho, differentiates between a Poet and a Sage in a following way:

There is a poet who makes it (poem), labours hard, decorates it, chooses the diction... and there is a sage who just sings. Sage is also a poet, but poet isn't a sage... His song isn't an intellectual arrangement (of words)... it's natural... it can't be stopped in the heart. (Osho's Discourse, Suno Bhai Sadho 6).

Bartwal's declaration that 'All are friends, no enemy', 'Nothing in this world to desire' (*Megh Nandini*, Verse 110) also make him a true sage: 'Saffron dress, Nothing better than this.' (Verse 110). Like a sage, he neither sings for the sake of writing poetry nor polishes and refines it with the artificial poetic devices. He sings poetry because there is an irresistible internal urge to do so. Bartwal has elevated himself from material platform of poetry to transcendental realm of pure devotional songs. He doesn't even fear the death now: 'Bid me farewell, the journey ends today' (Verse 118).

Bartwal's poetry is beginning with eros, passing through suffering and pain, and culminating in pure devotional songs; and so the pathos beginning with pity and pain, passing through utter cry and culminating in contending mood. The transcendence realized by Bartwal in the end, compels the readers to wash away with it. Undoubtedly, his songs will keep on reverberating the hills of Uttarakhand with his pathos. His poetry is the epitome of 'the songs of the soul'. The divine world of his poetry still remains a less ventured area among modern students and scholars of the poetry. He must be approached with historical precision in order to taste the mellow of his poetry. His poetry must find place in school and college syllabuses.

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(All the poems except 'Ceasing to flow on', are translated from Hindi to English by the author).