

Classic Poetry Series

Vishnu Vaman Shirwadkar
- poems -

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Vishnu Vaman Shirwadkar(27 February 1912 – 10 March 1999)

Vishnu Vaman Shirwadkar (Marathi: विश्वनाथ शिरवाडकर), popularly known by his pen name, Kusumagraj (Marathi: कुसुमग्राज), was an eminent Marathi poet, playwright, novelist, short story writer, apart from being a humanist, who wrote of freedom, justice and emancipation of the deprived, In a career spanning five decades starting in pre-independence era, he wrote 16 volumes of poems, three novels, eight volumes of short stories, seven volumes of essays, 18 plays and six one-act plays. His works like the Vishaka (1942), a collection of lyrics, inspired a generation into the Indian freedom movement, and is today considered one of the masterpieces of Indian literature., apart from his play, Natsamrat which has important place in Marathi literature. He was the recipient of several State awards, and National awards including the 1974 Sahitya Akademi Award in Marathi for Natsamrat, and the Jnanpith Award in 1988; he also remained chairperson of the World Marathi Conference in 1989. He was born in the city of Pune and spent most of his life in Nashik, Maharashtra.

Early Life and Education

He was born in Pune on 27 February 1912 as Though later he adopted, the name Vishnu Waman Shirwadkar. His primary education was in Pimpalgaon and high school education was in New English School, Nashik, which is now called as J.S. Rungtha High School of Nashik. He passed matriculation from Mumbai University.

Career

At age 20, Shirwadkar participated in a nonviolent resistance march -- satyagraha-- in support of compelling Brahmin priests in charge of a local prominent temple in Nasik to provide free access to the temple to people who belonged to the suppressed "untouchable" (Harijan) community. In the past, the priests had not allowed free temple access to that community under the Hindu caste system, which used to be observed much more vigorously then in India. Throughout his life, he either participated in or led many movements in Nasik to counter social or political injustice of some or other kind.

In his twenties, he published His first collection of poems, Jeevanlahari was published while he in his twenties. Soon he also got involved with Marathi cinema in Nashik, as he wrote a script for a mythological film, Sati Sulochana, in which he also acted. He also worked in journalism for while, before coming back to

poetry as a mainstay. 1942 was the turning point in the career of Kusumagraj, as a father-figure of Marathi literature, Vishnu Sakharam Khandekar, published Kusumagraj's compilation of poetry, Vishakha at his own expense, and in his preface describing Kusumagraj as a poet of humanity, wrote, "His words manifest the social discontent but retain the optimistic conviction that the old world was giving way to a new one." It came during the Quit India Movement, and carried the message of freedom and stood against slavery, and soon its words became popular with young men and women; in time it was to become his lasting legacy to Indian literature. After 1943, he started adapting the plays by literary giants like Oscar Wilde, Moliere, Maurice Maeterlinck and Shakespeare, especially his tragedies, and which played an important role in boosting Marathi theatre of the period. This continued into the 1970s when his masterpiece Natasamrat was first staged in 1970, with Sriram Lagoo as the lead.

In 1950, he founded in Nasik an Organization for Social Good --Lokahitawadi Mandal. While temperamentally he ranged from reclusive to exclusive, he had a keen social sense and championed the cause of the downtrodden without jumping himself into ground level activities. But his main claim to fame was his genius as a poet and writer. In 1954, he adapted Shakespeare's Macbeth, as Rajmukut, 'The Royal Crown' to Marathi, it starred Nanasahab Phatak and Durga Khote (Lady Macbeth) and later he also adapted Othello in 1960. He also worked as a lyricist in Marathi cinema.

His work reflected the changing social milieu, from being the reflection of national uprising during Indian freedom struggle and in the post-independence era it got steeped into rising social-consciousness amongst Marathi writers, which marked the advent of modern Dalit literature.

Awards and Recognition

In 1987, Kusumagraj was presented with the Jnanpith Award --a prestigious literary award in India—in recognition of his literary achievements, and in particular his writing of the play, Natasamrat, an adaptation of King Lear, for which he received Sahitya Akademi Award in 1974 He received Ram Ganesh Gadkari Award of All India Natya Parishad in 1985. Pune University conferred on him the honorary degree of . in 1986. In 1988, he received Sangeet Natya Lekhan Award.

Personal Life

He founded an organization named Kusumagraj Pratishthan was formed in Nasik in 1990 with the objective of encouraging various cultural activities and helping

the needy belonging to traditionally suppressed communities. Kusumagraj birthday is celebrated as World Marathi Day.

He died on March 10, 1999 in Nashik, where his home also served as the office of the 'Kusumagraj Pratishthan.

Tevha

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