

Chapter 1

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Pannalal Patel, the recipient of the Jnanpith Award, is one of the leading figures of Gujarati Literature. He has enriched Gujarati Literature by his various works – each and all written with marked felicity, power and beauty of expression. He was once hailed by his lifelong friend and another literary genius Umashankar Joshi as “no less a writer than Shakespeare”. He has to his credit nearly eighty volumes and is the winner of many prestigious literary awards.

Pannalal Patel was born on May 7, 1912, at Mandli village, now in Rajasthan, in the family of Nanalal Patel, a farmer with literary leanings. Nanalal used to recite ‘The Ramayana’, ‘Okhaharan’ and other mythological stories for the villagers of Mandli. This earned his house the nickname of “Abode of Learning”. Nanalal died when Pannalal was still a child, and his mother took up the responsibility of raising the children. Young Pannalal was always very close to his mother, so much so that his latter-day devotion to Mataji^a was seen by some as a manifestation of his search for the mother-image. Pannalal’s education progressed with great difficulty because of poverty. Depending on the help of others, he managed to study up to the

^a Mirra Alfassa, also known as The Mother, was the spiritual collaborator of Sri Aurobindo

eighth standard and it was during his school days that he came in touch with Umashankar Joshi, who was also a student of Sir Pratap High School at Idar.

After giving up his study, he worked in various capacities –from being a farmer to an oilman in an electricity company –before going on to become a noted writer. He was honoured with the Jnanpith award –the highest literary award in India in 1985 for his epic novel “Manvini Bhavai”.

Pannalal has often been likened to Maxim Gorky. Like Gorky, Pannalal had also graduated from the University of Life. Once he had noted: “Life appears to me like that of a spider that makes his own web, using his own saliva. The spider progresses through life on the strength of the strands of his own web. I, too, have gone about in this world, finding my own ways, learning and changing. What I know of life has come from experience.” Lack of formal education was amply compensated in Patel by an observant eye and a natural feel for words. He was a born storyteller. And his most forceful prose came in the early years of his writing career.

Pannalal Patel emerged on the Gujarati literary scene when his first novel “Valamna” was published in 1940. It was a straightforward, honest portrayal of the rural areas from where Pannalal hailed and enthused the noted Gujarati writer, the late Zaverchand Meghani, to ask him to write a special story for “The Phulchhab”, a popular Gujarati daily. And the outcome was “Malela Jiv”, which was written in just 24 days. Later, it was published in 1941. This was followed with his greatest work “Manavini Bhavai” published in

1947 and many other novels. Like “Malela Jiv”, “Manvini Bhavai” was also penned partly in the impoverished village house in Mandli and partly at his farm, where Patel grew maize. The novel evoked tremendous response from readers who were stirred by its dual qualities –realism, powerfully expressed in memorable word-pictures of village life, and the emotional characterization of the people in the story. It is the story of an indomitable man fighting a terrible famine.

The village, its people, their lives, hopes and aspirations, their problems and predicaments, their language and ways of life –all these are mirrored in his exquisitely crafted novels. Pannalal knew his village inside out and brought it to life in his novels with a high degree of artistic skills. He evolved a prose style tingled with the spoken language of North Gujarat to suit his novels based on the rural life of that region. Occasionally he also wrote against the urban setting, but he was at his creative best in his novels of rural life. The story element in his novels and short stories grows naturally like crops in the field, and the characters fully belong to their social contexts.

Pannalal has grown with every new book and has delighted Gujarati readers with his gripping power of words. The regional touches and the colloquial expressions made a beautiful blend in his novels and short stories. The novels “Malela Jiv”, and “Manvini Bhavai” and the short story “Kanku” have been made into widely acclaimed films. Besides, his novels have been translated into other Indian languages. “Manvini Bhavai, the celebrated novel by Late Pannalal Patel, came out in English (published by Sahitya Academy)

after Pannalal Patel was honoured with the Jnanpith award in 1985. This novel has also been rendered in Hindi and Rajshathani languages. His another highly acclaimed novel “Malela Jiv”, which he himself considered as one of his best, has also been translated in Punjabi and Kannada languages. Thus, Pannalal is truly a miracle in the twentieth century Gujarati literature.

When “Manvini Bhavai” was published, he was helplessly bedridden. His friend Sundaram, the great Gujarati poet and critic, was a follower of Sri Aurobindo. He sent him the blessings of Mataji^a from Pondicherry. Pannalal recovered, with a firm belief that he had got a new life because of Sri Aurobindo and Mataji. In 1958, he shifted to Ahmedabad. And in 1971, along with his two sons, Pannalal Patel started a publishing company called Sadhana.

In 1950 he was awarded the prestigious Ranjitram Gold Medal. Several of his works have received state honours. In the last phase of his life, Pannalal had taken to writing on mythological themes. Nevertheless, he is remembered for opening up the vast arena and ever-rich life in our villages. He is a modern master and a chronicler par excellence of rural society. Though he died of brain hemorrhage on 6th of April, 1989 at the age of 77, he would always be remembered for his outstanding contributions to Gujarati literature.

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