I.

Brief life sketch of Jaya Shankara Prasad.

Parentage & Birth. (The house of Sunghani Shahu)

Jaya Shankara Prasad was born in 1889 in Benares. His grandfather Babu Shiva Ratna Shahu nicknamed as Sunghani-Shahu was a soent merchant. He was a well known figure in the social, religious and commercial circles of the Town. He was God fearing and of Philanthropic disposition. Many stories are current up till now in and around Benares about his saintly habits and unflinching devotion to the cause of justice and righteousness. It is said that in the old age he practically led a life of a recluse.

His son Babu Debi Prasada was a worthy son of a worthy father. During his life time the fortune of the family was at its zenith. The house of Sunghani Shahu became proverbial sacred shrine where the celebrities of Art and literature never failed to pay their homage. Artists, playwrights, poets, authors, musicians, dancers, magicians, wrestlers, acrobats, fencers, and athletes all received patronage from this house. He was revered by the title of Meha Deve by his admirers, a rare honour only shared by the ruling family of Benares. He was a man of outstanding ability, and possessed an enterprising nature.

Jaya Shankara inherited all the good qualities of his family except a shrewd business acumen. God wished that a noble scion of the house of Sunghani Shahu might herald a new era of mystic literature by his creative genius, instead of adding a few thousands more to his family coffer.

Early childhood and Education.

Alas!! all great men Prasad began to exhibit at an early age the signs of his profound future genius. At the age of six he began to compose Hindi couplets to the utter amazement of the elder members of his family. At II he accompanied his father to the
pilgrimage of the various holy places, as Dvāra Kṣetra, Pushkar, Ujjain, Jaipur, Muttra, Ayodhya, Narbuda etc. A thrilling boating excursion in the river Narbuda through the hills and various other charming sights of the same nature left an indelible impression on the heart of this young pilgrim. A kind of restless inquisitiveness was aroused in his youthful heart to probe deep into the mysteries of the nature. The panorama of the gorgeous mountains, tumultuous rivers, and of the various citadels of the Rajasthani still vibrant with the chivalrous deeds of the sons and daughters of the soil gave great impetus to his tender faculties of imagination and perception. The child prodigy who had very rare opportunities in his later life for travels except once to Jagannāth Puri, and twice or thrice to Allahabad and Lucknow always felt a ceaseless urge in his heart to break assunder all the shackles of home life, and run far away from the artificial and choking atmosphere of the city into the smiling fold of the nature. Indeed such was the far reaching influence of this early pilgrimage.

His education in Queen's College Benares came to an abrupt end due to the sudden death of his father. He was then hardly 12 years old and was reading in the 8th class. But his elder brother Babu Kambhu Patna comforted him and spared no pains to provide all the facilities for his education at home. In Sanskrit grammar, poetics, Rhetorics, philosophy, Upanishads, and Vedas he was coached by his Guru Brahmacārī Dina Bandhu. He read the works of Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Milton, and other Master minds of English literature with various professors.

Grim struggle of life.

Three years after his father's death, his mother also breathed her last. Two years later his elder brother also left his earthly abode, leaving him all alone to face the grim realities of the life. The loss of the parents and dear brother in quick
succession, and the mad rush of the creditors like ravenous wolves to
maul him to pieces, paralysed his senses for a time, but soon he
rose from the state of despondency like a valiant fighter and grapple-
ed with the hard problems of the time. His first concern was to
improve his financial condition, which he did in a short time. Having
accomplished it he called all his creditors one by one and cleared off
all their accounts.

Marriage

His first two wives died soon after his marriage. Then he had no
mind for the third marriage. But at last he had to submit to his
widowed brother's wife's constant insistence with tearful eyes. He
had no issue from his first two wives. His only son Satna Shankara
was from his third wife. He had a happy home life.

Literary activities.

Though like his worthy predecessor Bharatendu Hari Charana, he
began to compose poems at an early age, but the era of his systemati
cal literary activities commences from 1906, and ends with 1936. During
this period he composed about 27 works, comprised of poetry, fiction,
plays and essays. His first poetical work was Prema Pathika which
he wrote in 1906 in blank verses in Braja Bhasha. In 1915 the same
was rendered into standard Hindi and was published with some
alterations. One can hardly believe who reads these poems that a
youth barely of 17 summers, could take such a dispassionate view
of life.

This conception of life found its consummation in his last poetical
work Kamaayan. Amongst his other poems Ansu, Jharna, and Lehara have
highly been appreciated by the scholars. In the dramatic domain he
has written as many as 13 plays some of which depict the various
while stages of the Indian History, the plays like Kaman, and Aika Ghunta
entirely strike a distinct note.

His five selections of short stories reveal an of his
creative genius. Every story has a new theme and entirely a new
style. Some of them appear like lyrical poems. In his 2 complete and one incomplete novels he displays a rare intelligence of a successful novelist.

As an essayist he manifests his remarkable grasp of the various obstruse subjects, his marvellous power of original thinking and breadth of vision. As a journalist he has inspired many new talents of Hindi.

In short to Hindi literature he has given many new ideas. In the poetry he has introduced intutional mysticism which has raised the Hindi poetry from the quagmire of Pseudo Romanticism to an entirely celestial level. To the plays he has given a highly artistic language, new technique, and themes from the annals of the Indian history. To the fiction he has given entirely a new colour.

In these pages we will discuss in detail the innovations and improvements made by him in all the domains of Hindi literature. In fact Prasada was a pioneer of many new tendencies in the modern literature.

The year 1936 was an year of his crowning glory when he gave us Kamyani, a mystic poem which deals with the life of the first man and first woman of the world.

Pilgrimage to Jegan Nath Puri in 1931.

The love of nature instilled in his mind in early childhood has been constantly making him restless and sick of home life, but his financial worries always stood in the way. His literary activities too were at a stand still due to these anxities. He built a house in 1931, which cost him a huge amount. In the business he was always a looser. Debts began to multiply. Another man at this state would have stopped all the charities and open handed generosity. But he had the high ideal of King Shivi's self abnegation before him. Thus he could curtail his expenses in the least. The same year at the suggestion of some of his friends he went on to the Pilgrimage to Jegan Nath Puri. The sight of the sea enraptured his mind, and inspired him to compose under the
Caption of Jagarnath, awakening, some of the most enchanting poems on the sea coast of Puri he felt as if he had come to his promised land. It was here that mother nature revealed herself to him in the form of Kamayani, that masterpiece of mystic beauty and sublime philosophy which made him immortal. It took about six years to complete this work. From Puri he returned towards the end of the year with a new angle of vision on life, fresh hopes and a strong determination to his home. In 1932 he took up his missing thread of literary activities and wore it to perfection up to 1936. His best novel 'Titali', the best poem 'Leher', his historic play Dharmo Swamini and incomplete novel 'Iravati' all belong to this period.

Last visit to Lucknow, protracted illness, and death.

In January 1937, at the invitation of some of his friends he went to Lucknow to see the All India Exhibition of Arts and Crafts. It was here that he was taken ill. He had to return to Benares in haste. For some days he had a relief. But from the 28th January he began to run temperature again. On the 23rd of February 1937, he was examined by a medical board and was declared infected with T.B. germs.

He was advised to go to some sanatorium in the hills, but he refused to go out of home. For about 9 months he was hanging between life and death. During this period some of his intimate friends offered him monetary help, but he declined to accept it. It was his principle in life never to accept any emolument for his literary works. The amount of Rs.500/- offered to him by Hindustani Academy and Rs.200/- by Nagri Pracharini Sabha in appreciation of some of his works were thankfully returned by him.

It is characteristic of the man that during this long illness his balanced, and sweet outlook on life ever remained unruffled. With a prophetic vision he knew long before the approach of inevitable, but like a mystic he lost himself into the divine fervour unmindful of the physical pain, and mental anguish.
The philosophy of life which he expounded through his works gave him unmitigated solace to sustain all sufferings at that critical moment of life.

It was in the middle of October 1937 that his condition grew worse. On Nov.14th towards the evening he began to experience some difficulty in breathing. Expert medical advice was secured, but there was no relief. He was in perfect senses upto the last moment. Next day at about 4-30 A.M. he breathed his last, chanting the holy name. The morning wind carried the sad news of his death to every lane and house of the city. People of all shades of opinions as he endeared himself to every-one soon flocked to his house. His funeral was attended by a record crowd of the mourners. His earthly remains were cremated at Narish Chandra Ghat Benares, the last resting place of his fore-fathers.

His private life.

So far we have described the literary side of his life, but let us see him now as a man.

It is admitted even by his worst critics that he led an irreproachable life. He had a captivating and majestic personality. His manners were aristocratic and highly refined. Physically he was very attractive. He had a large profile, aquiline nose, chiselled features and sunbright complexion. He was of medium height and of atheistic built.

In the prime of his youth he was very fond of wrestling and other gymnastics. He had a hobby for the collection of the flowers. In his own garden he had a collection of flowers and plants of rare variety. It is also said that he possessed a keen taste for all fine arts, as painting, sculpture, music, dance, and architecture.

From his writings some people conclude that he was a bohemian sort of gay man, but it is surprising that he was a strict vegetarian and of temperate and sober habits.

Circle of friends

He had very few friends. His ideal of friendship was very high, as it is evident from the large number of his short stories in which he has
expanded this theme.
In a passage of his short story Andhi his remarks over this subject clearly indicate his viewpoint thus.

The following few formed his intimate circle of friends. Deve Krishna Dossa, V.S., Vyas, R.M. Suman, M.D. Vajapeyi and Pandi K.P. Mistry, etc.

Inside his gay and frivolous external was hidden a deep tragedy of his life. The philosophic poet who has sung the melody of beauty and love how could he remain unaffected by these finer emotions. It is hinted by his friends that he had a dream girl, who was his driving force throughout his life. Who knows in the form of Deva Gene in Skand Gupta he has not described the tragic end of his own dream bride? He has himself admitted in the following poem which he composed for the autobiographic number of the Hindi Magazine Hansa, that his life was nothing but a stark tragedy.
(Reproduced in his selection entitled Lahara, Page. 5).

Similar outpouring of his troubled heart are found in several poems of Jharna, Lahara, and Ansu. The following few poems look as if he is telling through these his own story of disappointment and distress.

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A similar idea was pressed in his lyrical poem "Prema Pathika".

These pent up feelings and a deep yearning for the dream bride at last burst forth spontaneously into his last, mystic poem which is the crowning glory of his marvellous creative and imaginative genius.

In the following pages an attempt is made to examine art, style, language, ideas, tendencies, and technique etc., of a poet, novelist, playwright, essayist, journalist and as a harbinger of many other progressive movements in Hindi literature.