

DR SIDDESHWAR VERMA A FORGOTTEN SCHOLAR

Dr S P Shrivatsa

There are a few litterateurs in the world who devote themselves to the development of literature in letter and spirit. Dr. Siddheshwar Verma was one of them who was an internationally known linguist and phonetician. By dint of his devotion towards study he had acquired a fair knowledge of many major languages when he had just touched 37th year of his life. The languages he knew included Sanskrit, English, French, German, Greek, Latin, Arabic, Hindi, Urdu and when he reached 70th year of his age he had mastered over 30 languages including Tamil, one of the most difficult languages amongst the world languages. With the result he had been acknowledged by the both Indian as well as European scholars. But it is really very sad that such a great son of our country expired in Delhi almost unsung on 17 August, 1985. Even in Jammu, where he had served



Dr. Verma

as a Professor of Sanskrit for a pretty long time, he was mourned in a very small gathering of his admirers and disciples though he had dozens of them in this city of temples and at the time of his first death anniversary only a few scholars had gathered in a small room and paid tribute to him and passed a resolution demanding a Siddheshwar Verma Chair of Professorship in Jammu University and raising a memorial after his name. After 1987 it was felt as if the name of Dr. Siddheshwar Verma was just a myth. Linguistic Society of India, Jammu Club, however, held a seminar on 12th December 1991 which was presided over by Dr Ved Ghai and prof M L Lakanpal, the then Vice-Chancellor of Jammu University. Thus after a silence of four years he was again remembered by his admirers in Jammu. But it may be pointed out that great men never die and always remain immortal. It is true that Dr. Siddheshwar Verma was not so popular amongst general masses but he was highly acclaimed across the world.

Born in Rawalpindi on 3rd November 1887 to a well known Khatri family and named as Pindidas, he was brought up in a very serene and pious atmosphere as his mother Smt. Jamana Devi and father Ram Dass Nanda were a very religious couple. Ram Dass Nanda's ancestors had migrated from Totral, a small village near 'Katas Raj', a prominent and popular Hindu pilgrimage site in Pakistan.

A contractor by profession Ram Das Nanda was very hard working. Also, contrary to the characteristics of his profession he was sincere and conscientious. With the result his son Pindidas who was highly influenced by his parents had imbibed all good qualities from them which later on contributed to the making of his great personality.

His father being a P.W.D contractor had to move

from one place to another alongwith his family. With the result his son, Pindidas had to be admitted in different schools for his early education. He, therefore, studied in Rawalpindi, Kamalpur, Gujrat (Punjab), Jhelum, Gujranwali, Mianwali (now all in Pakistan). It is said that his paternal uncle Thakurdas was not in favour of his higher education, as he wanted him to be a great-businessman or reputed contractor. But the boy Pindidas had been bestowed with altogether different nature. So he did not agree with his uncle's proposal and carried on his studies uninterruptedly. He, therefore, studied upto B. A., in Godan College, Rawalpindi and passed M.A. in History from the Forman College, Lahore in 1911.

Incidentally, he came into the contact with Dr. Keshava Deva Shastri in 1906, whose dynamic personality and scholarship not only made an ever lasting impact on his career but also brought a commendable change in his outlook. With the result the boy, Pindidas inclined towards Sanskrit study and within a short span of period acquired a working knowledge of this great language. Obviously, the company of Dr. Shastri proved to be a blessing to Pindidas.

Meanwhile, he happened to come across Ballantyni's English translation of the Laghu Kumudi, a grammatical work based on Panini's Ashtadhyayi and also Siddhanta Kamudi's (another grammatical work based on Ashtadhyayi of Panini) English translation by S.C. Bose. He also studied Pantanjali's Mahabhashya and Charak-Samhita. He was so fascinated by these two books that he virtually became a slave of the Sanskrit language. Then he also acquired a copy of Panini's Ashtadhyayi which became his permanent company. And, it was only Ashtadhyayi which kindled a

desire in him for the study of linguistics, especially that of Indian linguistics. Once when he fell ill with malaria fever, even then he did not stop studying Ashtadhyayi. He used to keep it under the pillow of his bed and whenever he would be all alone he would start studying this most difficult grammatical treatise ignoring even his ailment. This was an ample proof of his love for Sanskrit language, especially for its so advanced Paninian grammar which according to Prof. Bloomfield of America - "is a greatest monument of human intelligence" as he recorded in his book Language. Pindidas, however, did not confine himself to study of only Sanskrit grammar but his study included Vedic and mythological literature and Shrimad Bhagvad Gita also later on he had written a scholarly commentary on poet Magha's Shishupal Badha. It is also said that when he was still in early age he used to read out the Gita to his mother with its explanation in Hindi. When the womenfolk of his neighbourhood also came to know about the same they also started to throng their house and listen to his recitation of verses of Gita with reverence. With the result firstly by his mother and then by all the women of neighbourhood he was called as 'Mahatma'. Whereas his maternal grand father started to nickname him as a new kalidasa, for his friends he was just a budding literary personality.

After doing MA (History) though he held several administrative posts, none could give mental solace to him as he was very much eager to acquire deep knowledge. After M.A. first of all he joined as a private secretary to Raja Sir Nahar Singh and side by side he was also asked to work as a private tutor to Prince Satrunjaya Singh who later became Raja of Bijwa (Oudh). But since he wanted to study

Sanskrit he left Maharaja's job and joined as a teacher in Hindu High School at Gujranwala where he was promoted as headmaster in 1915. But that administrative job too did not suite his nature in any way. Rather that proved a great hinderance to his scholarly pursuits. So ultimately he had to leave that job also. But luckily soon after that he joined as lecturer in Sanskrit in Prince of Wales College (now Gandhi Memorial Science College) Jammu and he continued there till his retirement in Nov. 1943, barring a period of about three years when he was sent abroad in connection with his research leading to D. Litt. degree.

During his stay in Jammu he, apart from his literary pursuits, developed interest in the comparative study of all the branches of the Indian philosophy vis-à-vis Western philosophy and culture. He worked day and night for four consecutive years and thus acquired very good command over philosophical knowledge. This study actually proved blessing for him, as the then authorities of the Education Department asked him to deliver special lectures on religious instructions on secular lines, and after that he was appointed as Secretary for India of the International Moral Education Congress in 1923.

Apart from his tremendous achievement in the field of philosophy, religion and culture, he showed keen interest to learn the major languages of the world such as French, Greek, Latin, Russian, Slavonic, German, Arabic, Persian and also Indian languages like Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi and also Tamil. Actually, it was the result of this keen interest of learning languages of Dr. Verma that he was awarded a language scholarship by Government of India for higher studies in Europe.

So he left for London in 1924. But before he started his research work in London he visited Paris in December 1924, where he met Prof. Jules Block, a renowned linguist of his time and also an authority on Indian languages. Dr. Block greatly influenced Dr. Verma's approach towards Linguistics, especially, Indian Linguistics. In other words it was also former's persuasion which decided the future course of latter's outlook towards research in London. Consequently, he decided to undertake research on the topic - "Critical Studies in the Observation of Sanskrit. "Grammarians in Ancient India." On completion of his research projects he was awarded the degree of D. Litt. by the London University in 1927. His thesis under the same caption was published by Royal Asiatic Society, London in 1929 and subsequently by M/S Munshi Ram Manohar Lal Lahore/Delhi. Dr. Verma's this book was highly appreciated by renowned scholars like Prof. Daniel James, Prof. R. L. Turner (both linguists of U.K.) and Dr. G. Morgenstierne (Norway).

Highly impressed by Dr. Verma's scholarship and genius Dr. Morgenstierne had said to him, "Would that there were many like you in India."

As if he had been watching Dr. Verma's scholarship for twenty years, Prof. Jones reacted in 1946 - "When I first came to know of Prof. Siddheshwar Verma over twenty years ago he at once impressed me as a man of no ordinary caliber. I soon discovered his scholarly qualities. He had and continues to have, in addition to his remarkable scholarly attainments, a deep interest in human relations and much spiritual insight."

After returning from London alongwith his research

outlook he started research on the dialects of Dardic, Kafari and Pahari groups. He quenched his thirst by learning many other European and Indian languages. With the result by the time he had attained the age of 70 he had learnt over 30 languages of the world including many major languages of our country.

Sincere by heart and sweet-spoken as he was, he never lost his temper and was affectionate towards all. He was punctual in true sense of term. When he used to go to Prince of Wales College (now G.G.M. Science College) people used to correct the time of their watches. He was very systematic, precise and consistent with regard to his daily routine. During summer vacation he used to spend most of his time either in collecting data of the above mentioned groups of dialects or staying at Kud to consolidate them. Actually, the whole credit goes to his wife who used to attend him like his shadow.

Having collected a detailed data of 27 dialects of North-West Himalayas, Dr. Verma had produced six separate glossaries of the same. Of them the study of Bhalesi dialect of Bhadrawahi group is considered to be one of the major pieces of Dr. Verma's works. His article-"Neuter Gender in Bhadrawahi" which was published in a journal of Indian Linguistics in 1991 is also considered to be one of the master pieces of his research work.

Another work of his Etymology of Yaska may also be considered no less than his major contribution towards Indian linguistics. And, then it was a summary consisting of three volumes of Dr. Grierson's gigantic 20,000 pages Linguistic Survey of India which Dr. Verma had undertaken and completed after putting hard labour for 13 years, which

brought much fame for him. Actually Dr. Garierson had devoted 25 years from 1903 to 1928 to complete all volumes of his great work and that too with the help of a big team of workers and government officials, whereas Dr. Verma all alone worked to complete this work in 13 years time. It was really a challenging task before Dr. Verma which he undertook after his retirement and that too at the age of 67 and completed when he was entering 80th years of his age. This work containing 15,000 pages was published between 1972-76 by V.V.R. Institute, Hoshiarpur (Punjab). One can easily imagine how much labour Dr. Verma might have put to complete this monumental work which is a landmark in the field of linguistics.

Among other important works of Dr. Verma are several hundred articles and research papers on linguistics including some papers on Mirza Ghalib's works in Dogri, Hindi, Urdu, Tamil and Punjab languages. He also collaborated with late Dr. Raghuvira in compiling an English-Hindi dictionary. When the writer of these lines visited V.V.R. Institute Hoshiarpur last time he was informed that more than two thousand pages research material of Dr. Verma is lying in the Institute. If published it can be very helpful for the scholars.

During early 1952 when Government of India had established a Hindi Directorate under the Ministry of Education Dr. Verma was appointed as Chief Editor to prepare Hindi terminologies. His work was appreciated by Dr. K.L. Shrivastava, then Education Minister of Union government.

On September 1, 1960 Dr. Verma left Delhi for Chandigarh to live with his elder daughter there. He stayed

in Chandigarh till 1972. During this period of 12 years he guided and helped hundreds of research scholars, and also assisted Acharya Vishwa Bandhu, the Chief Patron of V.V.R. Institute, Hoshiarpur in the preparation of several volumes of Vedic concords. He also prepared some detailed notes on the technical terms collected from the ancient Shikshas and Pratishakhya texts and also annotated index of ancient Phonetico-grammatical terminology. On account of his several articles on Urdu languages and literature, especially on Mirza Ghalib's works he was appointed as an honorary Chief Editor of the Urdu Encyclopaedia (linguistic section) by the Nizam of Hyderabad.

As already said, Dr. Verma had acquired so much proficiency in Tamil language also due to which he was able to write some articles of high standard on the topics concerning Dravidian linguistics. His notes and comments on Tamil Lexicon, Talkappian and the Purunanuru were appreciated by the linguists.

No doubt due to his scholarship of the world repute he was an institute unto himself. He was also instrumental for the foundation of the several literary societies like- (1) Linguistic Society of India alongwith Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee and Dr. A.C. Woolner with its first headquarter in Lalore, which was later on shifted to Calcutta and then to Poona where it is still functioning, (2) Association of Thinkers, (3) Shabda Brahma Parishad, and (4) Samabhava Mandal. When Dogri Research Institute, Jammu was founded in 1962, Dr. Verma was requested to be its one of the patrons which he continued till last moment of his life. When there was a question for the recognition of Dogri language by Sahitya Akademi it was Dr. Verma who pleaded the case of this language and ultimately the Chairman Dr.

Suniti Kumar Chatterjee was convinced to grant recognition to this language, in 1969.

In recognition of his devotion towards linguistic study and love for all the great languages of the world and their literature he was awarded 'Padma Bhushana' by the Government of India in 1957. He was also awarded the President's Certificate of honour for his contribution in the field of Indology in 1967. In the same year the Punjabi University, Patiala, conferred the D. Lit. (H.C.) upon him and was also honoured by the University of Jammu in April 1982. The Jammu and Kashmir Government felicitated him with 'Robe of Honour', Acharya Vishwa Bandhu of V.V.R. Institute had edited a felicitation volume namely 'Siddha Bharati' in two volumes in 1950 and presented to him in a function organized in his honour. We are very thankful to Dr. Verma that he had refuted Dr. Grierson that Dogri being a tonal language like Punjabi may be considered as one of the dialects of the latter. On the contrary he had established that Dogri was an independent language and was a ruin of a great language which was spoken in the area stretched from Himalaya to Ambala Cantt. Though at present Dr. Verma is no more with us, yet his great deeds are with us to guide us for furthering the cause of the languages and literature.

On his death Mr. Kalim Akhtar had rightly recorded in Pakistan Times, Lahore sometime in October 1985- "He is no more in this world, but I still visualize him walking quietly on the Residency Road, Jammu, steeped deeply in his thoughts. So weep no more on his death, for his achievements will be remembered a long time to come. He was indeed a great 'Darwesh' who always worked for the

upliftment of humanity in general."

Again it may not be out of place to quote here Dr. K.G. Saiyiddin also, a great Educationist of the modern times and great admirer of Dr. Verma who once had given a rich tribute to him - 're-incarnation' in modern days of those scholars of the past who found "their highest self realization in the disinterested pursuit of trust." When this writer had a chance to meet him at his residence in Chandigarh on 9th September, 1964, he was in the 78th year of his age, but even then, as he said, he would work for 15 hours daily. Wearing white dress from top to toe with white beard, sparkling eyes and glowing face he would look like an ancient saint. I had the opportunity to sit with him from 9 A.M. to 3 P.M. on that day.

It was my good luck that he had given me so much time as he was very much generous towards Jammuites. That meeting was fixed one month earlier through a correspondence otherwise without prior appointment it was very difficult rather impossible to meet him as he was very much punctual. He used to schedule his daily routine minute to minute. It is really sad that people of Jammu have forgotten Dr. Verma. After all he had remained and worked here for 30 long years. Something should have been done to keep alive his memory.

(The author is a former Professor of Sanskrit.)

