

Works of Dr Kundan Lal Chowdhury: A Voice of Kashmiri Pandits

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A practicing doctor by profession and a Professor in the premier Medical College in Kashmir, Dr Kundan Lal Chowdhury (KLC) was a household name in Jammu and Kashmir. He achieved fame as a writer, poet, social scientist, essayist and reviewer in addition to being a very popular physician of high repute with a unique approach to healing people.

He wrote extensively on diverse subjects. His poems, essays, diary extracts, and short stories appeared in national and international journals. A recipient of numerous awards including the Best Book Award from the J&K Academy of Art, Culture and Languages, he published three anthologies, a travelogue and several collections of short stories. He is probably the first short story writer in English from Kashmir. Poetry was his passion from early adulthood. He found the urge to write and this became his second vocation. He published several anthologies and books of short stories.

Born in 1941 in Srinagar, Kashmir, he grew in one of only two Kashmiri Hindu families in a sprawling neighbourhood of Kashmiri Muslims. His childhood was spent in a joint family and he received his primary education in government schools. Later, in 1962, he graduated in medicine from Punjab University and earned a post graduate degree in Medicine from Delhi University in 1966. Soon after, he joined the Medical College in Srinagar as a Professor. A few years later he started his own private medical practice and acquired a reputation as a doctor with a great healing touch.

Like almost all Kashmiri Hindus (Pandits), he was driven into exile and took refuge in Jammu in 1990 in the wake of terror unleashed by Pakistan trained and inspired jihadis on the hapless Kashmiri Pandit minority of Kashmir. This was a traumatic event in the lives of

the exiled Hindus; a trauma that he has captured in his writings.

Deeply moved by his own plight and the plight of fellow refugees, a large number of whom were living in the refugee camps in the blistering heat of the plains and suffering from multiple ailments, he held many medical camps to help them.

Through various papers and articles in medical and scientific journals he drew the attention of the world to this tragedy and to the trauma of the Kashmiri Pandit (KP) refugees and identified stress related physical and psychological syndromes in the displaced population.

He also joined the growing movement for political and social rights of the exiled Kashmiri Pandits. He spoke at seminars, wrote articles for newspapers and made himself present on radio and TV. He consistently advocated for fair play and justice. He emphasized the reversal of ethnic cleansing and the return to the homeland in Kashmir Valley as the only long-term solution to the KP issue. He drafted the manifesto of the Panun Kashmir, a movement among the exiled KP population which delineated how KPs can be settled back in the valley.

In the year 2000 he published a volume in verse entitled *Of Gods, Men and Militants*. In it he describes how during the late 1980s the Kashmir Valley experienced political instability and increased infiltration of terrorist outfits from across the border. By early 1990, noisy and violent agitations escalated to harassment, threats and targeted killings especially of Kashmiri Pandits. Law and order broke down in the state. Many KPs fled the valley and others were forced to do so with threats. The escape of KPs began as a trickle but soon became a mass exodus. Yet all those fleeing in fear, believed in returning soon to their beloved valley. In this book he laments the sad state of affairs which the Muslim society of Kashmir also had descended to, in the dark period leading up to and after the exile of Kashmir Pandits. This book takes a sarcastic look at the initial successes of the jihadi terror

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machine against the Indian state and the denouement that followed the crushing of this insurrection.

KLC felt most at home with poetry, his original passion as a writer, and in 2003 he published his first book of poetry *A Thousand Petalled Garland* (2000). This is a collection of viscerally felt poems with themes of longing, pain and terminal decline, all in the backdrop of exile. Here are some passages:

On longing:

I saw her in a dream
that lingered for some time
in the twilight between waking and sleeping,
waiting for me to hold it in my palm.
I closed my fist on the dream lest it slip away.
My fist will not open till the night descends
and I dream her dream again.

Often as children
we tied a knot in our handkerchief
to capture a star and would not let it go
till we got our wish.
I have again trapped a star
and will hold it captive
till she materialises for me

On Pain

Pain, like fire, consumes.
Like fire it purifies.
And like fire it sublimates.
Each one of us has to go through the fire test of pain
our own or
of losing a near and dear one.

On Exile

Keys

Even after a decade in exile
I hang, from my girdle, this bunch of keys,
keys that I carried with me
when I was forced to flee,
keys to my home,
keys to my relics, my diary, my library,
keys that opened the sanctum where my gods reside,
all the keys
except the keys to my new destination.

I keep wandering in exile,
carrying these keys
like an albatross.

I know the locks to these keys
have been forced open or broken,
and all they guarded taken away,
my little possessions squandered,
my secrets laid bare,
books consigned to flames
or sold worth their weight as trash,
the prayer room desecrated,
the gods defiled.

These keys that I carry with me
are rusted with disuse
but I do not throw them away .
I rub them softly, gently,
Like Aladdin's lamp,
And all my treasures materialize.
They help me unlock
The memories of yesteryears.

Over the next few years, his life was brightened by the arrival of three grandchildren. His experiences in grandparenting are celebrated in *The Enchanting World of Infants* (2008). It is a uniquely diversified poetic narrative that takes the reader along an adventurous journey into the enchanting world of infants. In this anthology, little angels take the reader along in a dance of life, while the parents nurture with the labour of love and the grandparents inundate them with adoration that even the gods envy.

For this anthology, he was awarded The Best Book award by the J&K Academy of Arts, Culture and Languages and was invited to Srinagar to receive this award. This was a trip back to homeland after a gap of eighteen years. He was there for just for two days and went on a whirlwind tour of Srinagar and its environs. His reflections are recounted in the book of verse *Homeland After Eighteen Years*.

In this unique composition, he covers a lot of ground, traveling to different places, catching up with the enormous changes that had taken place in the valley. In the book the narrative unfolds in quick, short episodes as the author moves from one place to another, traveling back and forth in time from the days of his childhood, comparing what was with what is, and looking into the future for how it is going to be. The travelogue is one of the first to bring the reader to know and feel the truth beyond the falsehoods that had masked the real tragedy of ordinary Kashmiris, and describes candidly how the guiding principles of their lives—of unity in religious diversity—got a severe mauling and changed the identity of the people in the valley. The narrative also brings out the tragedy of the Kashmiri Pandits, who were driven out in an exodus. Two decades later, their institutions, their homes and their temples lie in shambles. Their gods are

abandoned and forlorn, looking for devotees who have fled in fear. The author poses the query: what hope for a reconciliation and reconstruction of the devastated social and cultural edifice of Kashmir?

All through his exile in Jammu, since 1990, KLC kept writing despite his busy engagement with the displaced people who had fallen prey to all kinds of ailments, most of them a result of the stress caused by displacement. His interaction with peoples of all hues gave him material for several highly acclaimed books of short stories.

In 2012 he published his first story book *Faith and Frenzy*. This collection brings to the reader, intimate details of forgotten Kashmiris of all hues, caught in the quagmire of terror and murky politics, and weighed down by the historical burden of a long confrontation between India and Pakistan. Their stories remained untold, submerged as they stay under layers of shady rhetoric and politics of deceit. Most, but not all, stories take place in a background of escalating militancy that brought terror, insecurity and mayhem into the lives of people and dealt a deathblow to the tradition of amity, tolerance and peaceful living that had defined Kashmiri life over significant periods of history. These are also stories of reconciliation and reaffirmation of religious diversity. Also of thousands of Kashmiris, mostly Pandits, who were forced into exodus from the valley to the plains of India — their lives before and after the exodus and their identity crisis. A unique feature of many of these stories is that they are discovered and revealed through the lens of a doctor who is also a keen observer of a society in flux. The author himself is the narrator of the stories. More importantly, in most of them he is also involved as one of the key participants. His initial contact with the main characters often begins in his role as a physician; he receives them as patients and, while providing his professional services, he finds himself entwined into the intricacies, uncertainties and struggles of their lives. The stories peep deep into their lives, and probe inside their souls. Above all, these are stories of universal human circumstance.

Another book of short stories *Why Don't you Convert* followed in 2015. This is a collection of stories based on true events spanning several decades in the life of the author—from the idyllic early days as a fresh medical graduate in Kashmir, to the trauma of the refugee camps

in Jammu. He looks at his subjects not only through the lens of a doctor but also through the prism of a writer, interested in their problems as much as in the subjects themselves with their myriad physical, psychological and existential problems. You have the story of a man unable to erase the spit that his father-in-law flings into his face; a young woman caught between the humiliation of rejection and the relentless persuasion to convert to Islam; a doctor kidnapped to treat a terrorist in his hideout; a running cricket commentary that brings to life a patient in coma; a Muslim *pir* with magical powers to congeal the blood in the womb of maidens; a dwarfish boy who will stop at nothing to grow tall; an old man who develops intractable hiccups after giving chase to a thief; a bear hug that robs a doctor of his sleep. Each story brings alive the human touch as the deft narrative unfolds through scenes and situations, through narratives and dialogue, through drama and suspense, through agony and ecstasy, holding the reader spellbound.

Following an accident in 2009 in which she suffered a hip fracture, KLC's mother was confined to bed and suffered a terminal decline, passing away in 2011. During this period, KLC was the primary care giver for his mother. His reflections during this period are brought out in the book of verse *The Final—Dialogues Between Mother and Son* (2017). This book is a deeply philosophical introspection into life, death and the meaning of life.

In 2019 another book of short stories, his last published work: *Room in Our Hearts*, is an eclectic mixture of finely crafted short stories from Kashmir. These are tales of our times, of ordinary people, their joys and sorrows, their hopes and fears, their beliefs and doubts, and their desire to get along in life in spite of multiple challenges. Of people who have been uprooted from their homes and are trying to find their moorings again, of the people they left behind, and of the unbreakable bonds that connect them in spite of the forces of disruption and discord. Once again he drew upon his experiences as a physician and a keen observer of people to present this colourful bouquet. The author's sympathetic eye and humanity shine through each of these stories. The duality of human nature—the good and bad, the indulgence and indifference, trust and scepticism, love and hatred—resonate in all the stories and make *Room in Our Hearts* a riveting read.