Nirmal Verma

Nirmal Verma (1929-2005) was among the most prominent and distinguished Hindi novelists, essayists, and short story writers of the second half of the 20th century. He was born in Shimla, a Himalayan town that the British used as summer capital. His father was posted there as a government officer, and Verma spent a large part of his childhood there. Shimla was to remain an important character in several of his works. He later went on to do a master’s degree in History at the elite St. Stephens College in Delhi. Though he was briefly enamoured of the ideals of Communism, he lost his faith in the mid-1950s, especially after the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956. This was compounded later by the Soviet invasion of Prague in 1968. Eastern Europe was important to Nirmal Verma, as he lived in Prague from 1959 to 1968, where his work at the Oriental Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences included translating prominent Czech writers into Hindi. As a result of his work, certain Czech writers – most famously Milan Kundera (1929–) – became known to Hindi readers before achieving fame in Western Europe and the United States.

Verma also used his stay in Prague to travel widely across Europe, including Western Europe, and some of his works (travelogues, and novels such as *Those Days (1964)*) are set in those various European countries. His return to India caused him to re-evaluate Indian traditions, and many of his later works directly thematised Indian traditions and modernism, causing some to accuse him of idealising and sentimentalising tradition. In all of this, he had much in common with Agyeya (1911-1987). Both were accused by Hindi critics of being deeply westernised and elitist. Perhaps because of this they both, especially in their essays, sought probingly for what was deepest in Indian tradition, including what might have to be excised, what might have to be rehabilitated, and what might be resilient and worth preserving. Verma’s long drawn-out literary and intellectual trajectory is especially fascinating as he, with his many years in Eastern Europe during the height of the Cold War, reveals a distinctive, rare and deeply nuanced facet of what it means for an Indian intellectual to retain a critical kinship with Left politics over a long time, and in a foreign country. After he returned to India, this continued in his criticisms of the Emergency, but his later sympathetic treatment of tradition (when his critics began to accuse him of leaning to the Right) revealed a controversial evolution of political and literary thought.

More concretely, and in literary terms, Verma’s achievement was that, at his best, in short stories like *Parinde* [Birds, 1959], and in novels like *Lal Teen ki Chhat* [The Red Tin Roof, 1974], he was able to write in such a way that there was only a transparent line between on the one hand the mundane and on the other hand an elusive but palpable accumulation of mood. Reading Verma repeatedly, one is still amazed at how in his work the everyday – where so little happens and so little is said – nevertheless manages to amass such intricate, unbearable, and insistent affect.