

**”TO FORTUNE AND TO FAME UNKNOWN”: BHUVANESHWAR PRASAD  
SRIVASTAV’S CONTRIBUTION TO HINDI *EKANKI* (ONE-ACT PLAYS)**

**Meenakshi Pawha**

Associate Professor, Department of English and, Modern European Languages  
University of Lucknow, Lucknow-226007

Bhuvaneshwar Prasad Srivastav (1910-1958), has been languishing in the literary wilderness for far too long. He was one of the leading exponents of the genre of *ekanki* (one-act plays) and made a unique contribution to Hindi literature. Bhuvaneshwar was a contemporary of Munshi Premchand (1880-1936) and Ramvilas Sharma (1912-2000) whom he met during the conference of the Progressive Writers Association in 1936 in Lucknow. His erudition was in oblivion due to his wayward lifestyle and the world of letters was teeming with a constellation of writers who had earned an unrivalled reputation for themselves. Premchand acknowledged him as a writer and motivated him to carry on with his literary pursuits.

Bhuvaneshwar was a rebel in his approach towards life and literature. He was way ahead of his times, and as a visionary, he poured out his myriad experiences in his writings that did not elicit necessary enthusiasm from writers and readers alike. Rather, his oeuvre was largely misconstrued by his generation. In subsequent years, his reputation spiralled to an extent that Bhuvaneshwar impacted the entire intellectual climate of the contemporary Hindi writers.

This paper attempts to locate Bhuvaneshwar Prasad in the pantheon of the Progressives, who as part of the movement prodded authors and other artists out of their world of conformity, and endeavours to explicate how his one-act plays represent the existential crises in the post war world.

Bhuvaneshwar was born in Keruganj (Khoya Mandi) of Shahjahanpur district of Uttar Pradesh. He suffered tremendous emotional loss with the death of his mother in his childhood which impacted his psyche. His father, Onkar Baksh, married another woman, Chameli Devi. Owing to the financial adversity and the pressure of bringing up children from his second wife, his father could not afford to offer Bhuvaneshwar a good life (Pathak, 2020). Being constantly poked by people in his own family, he got love and affection from his paternal uncle and his wife (Sharma, 3). Irrespective of his unloved childhood, he emerged a brilliant student in English in his school years. He had started writing in Hindi and Urdu. The students and the teachers were impressed and awestruck by the depth of his knowledge and understanding. This spawned unprecedented jealousy, antagonism and severe criticism against him in his home town. Graduating with B.A. Honours in English from Shahjahanpur, he moved to Allahabad for his M. A. in 1933. Here he came in contact with Sajjad Zaheer (1899-1973), a young Urdu writer who came out with a volume in Urdu entitled *Angare* (1932) comprising his work along with four stories by Dr Rashid Jahan (1905-1952), Ahmad Ali (1910-1994), and Mahmud Zafar (1908-1954) and a one-act play. This volume became highly controversial and was immediately banned by the government of the United Provinces in March 1933.

Bhuvaneshwar would often be present at Sajjad Zaheer's meetings at Canning Road in Allahabad with Raghupati Sahay Firaq (1896-1982) and Ahmad Ali. He made two more friends in Allahabad, Shivdan Singh Chauhan (1918-2000) and Shamsheer Bahadur Singh (1911-1993), who were doing their M.A. Reminiscing the days in 1936, Ramvilas Sharma later wrote: "There was a young man Bhuvaneshwar who was often seen with Premchand, Firaq, and Sajjad Zaheer. He had a good knowledge of English and Urdu, and he was exceptionally proficient in impressing students and professors in the University with his wit" (qtd. in Yayavar 16). Bhuvaneshwar came into the limelight when Premchand published his work in *Hans*. Premchand took cognisance of his work which gave an impetus to Bhuvaneshwar's literary career by publishing many of his later works in *Hans*.

Premchand published the first one-act play of Bhuvaneshwar, "Shayama: Ek Vaivahik Vidambana" (1933), based on George Bernard Shaw's *Candida*. Later "Ek Samyahin Samyavadi" (1934) and "Shaitan" (1934) too appeared in *Hans*. Bhuvaneshwar's other three one-act plays were compiled in a single volume called *Karwan* (1935), which included "Pratibha ka Vivah," "Rahasya Romanch", and "Lottery." His other one-act plays include: "Mrityu," "Patit," "Hum Akele Nahin Hain," and "Sawa Aath Baje" (1936). "Strike" (1938) and "Usar" (1938) were published in *Hans*, and "*Adamkhor*" appeared in *Rupabh* (1938). Prasad published "Inspector General" (1940), a one-act version of a play by Nikolai Gogol; "Roshni aur Aag" (1941) in a magazine named *Vishwawani*; "Kathputlian" (1942) first one-act symbolist play; "Photographer ke Samne" (1945), "Tambe ke Keere" (1946), "Roshni Ki Aag" (1946), "Ithihas ki Kechul" (1948); "Azadi ki Neev," "Jerusalem" and "Sikander" (1949), "Akbar," "Changez Khan" and his last one-act play "Seekhon ki Gadi" (1950).

Bhuvaneshwar's contribution to Hindi Literature in the genre of one-act plays (*Ekanki*) remains significant for his engagement with the form and the futuristic themes. T. S. Eliot, in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," has talked about the "historical sense that a writer should have to carry and impart the literary wisdom and knowledge in his work." The article "Leek se Hatkar Bhuvaneshwar ne Racha Sahitya ka Sansar" (2021) by Surendra Vajpayee, refers to the "historical sense" that Bhuvaneshwar had. Quite surprisingly, this was not connected with the past but with the future. Bhuvaneshwar began a new genre of writing in Hindi literature and came up with a unique style of writing one-act plays. His flamboyant writing style and radical themes are highly controversial in literary circles (Raya 1).

Devendra Raj Ankur and Mahesh Anand delineate the emergence, evolution, and development of one-act plays in Hindi in their collection *Aath Ekanki* (2012). It is significant to note that Ankur and Anand have not only placed Bhuvaneshwar along with other writers of *ekanki* like Rajkumar Verma, Upendranath 'Ashk, 'Jagdishchandra Mathur, Lakshmi Narayan Lal, Vishnu Prabhakar, Mohan Rakesh, and Surendra Verma; but have also given him due importance by keeping him in the first place ascertaining the fact that he is the father of one-act plays (*ekanki*) in Hindi written in a style befitting the post-war world.

Bhuvaneshwar, a student of English literature, became familiar with the plays of G.B. Shaw, who had profoundly influenced the writing of "Shaitan", which he duly acknowledged. In addition, he came across the works of other playwrights like August Strindberg, Henrik Ibsen,

and Oscar Wilde. He was considerably enthralled by the works of Oscar Wilde to the extent that he wanted to achieve a similar status in Hindi literature.

Bhuvaneshwar was aware of the theories of Sigmund Freud in the fields of psychology and psychoanalysis and had read the works of D. H. Lawrence. His extensive reading of English literature and his vivid artistic aptitude came to fruition in his one-act plays. Socially, he raised his voice on equality, class division, women's issues, and stereotypical norms; psychologically, he was interested in unfolding the suppressed, inexpressible, and unexamined human thoughts and dilemmas.

His modernist inclination and existential approach made him explore the absurdity in human life and action, which he portrayed succinctly in his "Tambe ke Keere" (1946). He was acquainted with the developments of drama in the West and understood how the World War II had influenced various literary genres. His modernist inclination and existential approach made him explore the absurdity in human life and action, which he portrayed succinctly in his "Tambe ke Keere" and his other one-act plays much before The Theatre of the Absurd began in Europe. Sameer Kumar Pathak (2020) gives a detailed description of his background and his literary contributions. He is considered the first practitioner of the Theatre of the Absurd, and "Tambe ke Keere" is considered the first play of its kind in Hindi.

Bhuvaneshwar's radical approach did not remain confined to just the one-act plays. He introduced meaninglessness, hollowness, and sentimentality in his oeuvre. He also explored the genre of short stories in his unconventional way. Thus, it is not surprising when Mamta Kalia (2011), in "Editor's Note" to *Hindi*, writes, "Bhuvaneshwar is full of passion and fury and an abiding sense of the absurdity of life. Like Bernard Shaw, his outbursts denote his personal chaos" (5).

In "Ekanki ke Bhav", Bhuvaneshwar infuses human concerns through the voices of Stree Swar and Purush Swar. Talking of being stifled in the vortex of human relationships and existential crisis, he raises the question not on "What man is doing? But "what man is?" There is also an explication that 'man' here is not used in the gendered sense of man and woman, but in the general sense of being human, and woman is also a part of this humanness. He expresses concern on development issues as its paths are being carved out, and as an astute littérateur, he identified the subsequent deterioration that would ensue. He, thus envisioned, that instead of progression, there is a retrogression working in human society and the world around it.

"Shayama: Ek Vaivahik Vidambana" (1933) is based on the dilemmas of marriage and the conflicts that are generated by conjugal ties. This play has five main characters: Amarnath Puri (30 years old), Shyama (Mrs Puri), Appi (Assistant of Mr Puri), Manoj (a 19 years old boy) and Heera. The play shows that just by fulfilling the rites and rituals in marriage, a woman does not become a man's wife. For a man to have a wife requires that there should be love between them, they should understand and care for each other. The play depicts two people tied together in a bond of marriage who are estranged. Manoj is symbolic of people who raise voices against the ancient customs and norms and substantiate his views logically and rationally. He lays premium on the doctrine of materialism as the ultimate goal and envisions a life of luxury for himself.

On the other hand, Shyama symbolises the women driven by western culture, who do not believe marriage is a bond to be carried on monotonously. She wants to be a free bird than to be bound up with chains of marriage. She believes idealism is hypocrisy. She is a complex personality who is Janus-faced. She is not what she projects. This play ruthlessly depicts the realities of marital life (Sharma and Kaur, "Shayama: Ek Vaivahik Vidambana").

The characters in "Shaitan" (1934) include Purush, Stree, Yuvak, Hardev Sah, Rajain, Naukar, and Sergeant. Rajain is the maternal uncle's son of Hardev Sah and the owner of the estate. However, Rajain fled from his house at a young age. The responsibility of the estate fell on Raja Hardev Sah against his desire. He wants to serve his country. Rajain is filled with all the vices in the world. One day Rajain appears drunk and faltering before Raja Hardev Sah. He is filled with radical and innovative ideas and considers education as the medium for the disabled. Rajain religion is money. He lives a life of luxury and has no room for faith and spirituality, and considers them dispensable. He is a materialist young man with lacks purpose, ethics, principles in his life. He represents the class of those young men who want to live only for themselves. He has not driven by any altruistic feelings and is extremely selfish in his ways. In this play, Bhuvaneshwar has projected the importance of money in the world governed by material pursuits. Akin to Shaw, he makes his characters his mouthpiece to articulate his views on the importance of money (Sharma and Kaur, "Shaitan").

"Ek Samyahin Samyavadi" (1934) is a satire on a socialist comrade shown in a love relationship with a labourer's wife. The characters in this play include Sunder (Labour), Parvati (Wife of Sunder), Govind (Friend of Sunder), Mr Mishra (Leader of labours), Mr Kapoor (Ally of Mr Mishra), Manohar Swaroop Agrawal (Mill Owner), Vridh Majdur (Old Labour), and Ghar ka Naukar (Helper in the House). The setting is Kanpur, where some labours are living. Comrades keep Parvati as a housemaid and seduce her to enter into an illicit relationship with them. They convince her to stay in a portion of their house. The theme of this one-act play is the transition from equality to inequality, from socialism to hierarchy. The play thus projects the complex psychology of human beings disguised in the hypocritical appearance of idealism and principles but lacks morality and ethics. The human weaknesses and vices continue to flourish under the simple garb of idealism, but they find themselves giving up all their principles at an opportune moment. Bhuvaneshwar has tried to project the pathetic lives of labours in abject poverty, the domestic scuffles, and external forces that further make their lives arduous. The labourers understand that there is no way to bring about a change. All grandiose talks about progress and development are mere myths and deception catalysed by social activists, socialists and capitalists. This play brings to centre stage the issue of marriage and survival and allows women to think beyond the social and stereotypical roles prescribed by the society (Sharma and Kaur, "Ek Samyahin Samyavadi").

"Pratibha ka Vivah" (1935) is a problem play based on the man-woman relationship. The characters in this play include Pratibha (an eighteen years old girl), Mohan (father of Pratibha), Prakash Verma (an older man interested in marrying Pratibha), Mahendra (a young man interested in marrying Pratibha), Mr Joshi (a householder), and Mrs Joshi (wife of Mr Joshi). This play shows that a woman sacrifices her love for financial stability, but then she fulfils her

lust with her lover instead of her husband. A woman may marry a middle-aged man to achieve a good life and social reputation. All the characters in this play are materialistic and do not proclaim any idealism. They understand the reality of life and face reality (Sharma and Kaur, "Pratibha ka Vivah").

"Strike" (1938) is based on the man-woman relationship in marriage. There are three characters in the play: Shrichand (Husband), Stree (Wife) and Teen Yuvak (Yuvak Ek, Yuvak do, and Yuvak teen). The female characters in Bhuvaneshwar's one-act plays seem to be influenced by the western notions of womanhood, yet they are shown caught in the problems of Indian life. "Strike" presents a woman who is inclined towards love, marriage, individuality, and self-desire. She does not have the warmth usually expected from the wife to be shared for the husband. The title indicates its unconventional use of the word "strike" dislocated from its usual context of stopping the work in factories and industries. In this one-act play, "strike" is used to suggest the fragile relationship that exists between husband and wife, almost a mechanical and formal bond devoid of love and concern. The husband and wife in the play are not shown quarrelling or disagreeing, yet the gap between them becomes evident in their conversations. There is a contradiction in the characters of husband and wife as both of them are driven towards their ways (Margret 45-47).

"Tambe ke Keere" (1946) is a one-act play with six main characters: Lady Announcer, Thaka Afsar (Tired Officer), The Rickshawala, Pareshan Ramni (Worried Ramni) Masroof Pati (Busy Husband), and Pagal Ayah (Insane Ayah) aur Kuch ladke (and a few boys). Bhuvaneshwar avoids naming each character, keeping them nameless. He conforms to the conventions of the Theatre of the Absurd. The stage directions clearly state it to be a play for the drawing room of affluent men. Pareshan Ramni and Masroof Pati constantly bring forth to the audience the theme of isolation and failure in communication. The dissatisfaction with the absurdity of human existence is starkly presented. The internal and psychic reality it recreates is profoundly moving. The dehumanisation of the human being is symbolised through the character of The Rickshawala. The setting of the play in an enclosed area comprising one room implies that the world outside that room is threatening. Bhuvaneshwar Prasad draws attention to the psychological reality and disillusionment of human hopes and dreams. "Tambe ke Keere" is concerned with expressing the difficulty of finding meaning in a world encumbered by perpetual change. Beset with uncertainties, the characters in the play disintegrate. Bhuvaneshwar is confronting a world in which God is dead, a world in which the existentialist sense is absurd. This play marks a shift from the world's objective reality outside to the subjective reality of inner state of consciousness.

Ankur and Anand (2012) opine that the contribution of Bhuvaneshwar lies in bringing the genre of *ekanki* nearer to ordinary human life. Owing to the influence of western writers, he tried to give a direction to Hindi literature towards the themes and concerns which were being played in the West. The focus of his one-act plays was to depict the psychological conditions of the modern man. Bhuvaneshwar felt, with the rise of education and economic growth, promiscuity became rampant. Conversation in his plays remains brief, fluent and underplayed, yet it appears artificial, more synthetic than natural.

Bhanu Bharti affirms that in 1946 even when the dramatist of the Theatre of the Absurd had not started writing, it is mystifying to find Bhuvaneshwar touching upon the techniques and theme in the realm of drama that veritably anticipate the absurdists (qtd. in Rai, 2020). Bhuvaneshwar made use of the conventions of the Theatre of the Absurd with plots lacking order, devoid of reason, meaningless dialogues, chaotic, illogical and obscure settings. Though the situation in the play might be rendered complex and ambiguous by the use of equivocal dialogues, a close reading conveys the deeper meanings embedded in the words. The dialogues and events that emerge in the one-act plays unfold multiple layers of characters. His one-act plays are crucial in evincing the scattered lives people lead in modern times. He thus condensed and communicated the predicament of modern man through his new idiom and style.

Bhuvaneshwar was the product of an age that was marked by all kinds of upheavals. He had seen life filled with corruption, boredom, debauchery, and artificiality. He was familiar with the pain of disillusionment of the generations growing up in post-independent India and whose dreams were shattered, suppressed and misguided by the lack of political leadership and society driven by selfish corrupting motives. These generations were destined to live a life of destitution. Democracy did not play the big equaliser that it was meant to be, post- colonisation. Nothing seemed to have changed for a significant part of the population as they continued to be twice-colonised. Bhuvaneshwar attempted to project this vacuum in the lives of people through his characters.

### Works Cited

1. Ankur, Devendra Raj, and Mahesh Anand. *Aath Ekanki*. Vaani Prakashan, 2012.
2. [https://content.kopykitab.com/ebooks/2016/02/5909/sample/sample\\_5909.pdf](https://content.kopykitab.com/ebooks/2016/02/5909/sample/sample_5909.pdf)
3. Kalia, Mamta. Editor's Note. *Hindi: Language, Discourse, Writing*, Vol. 6, No. 4, October-December 2011, pp. 5-6. <http://www.mgahv.in/Pdf/Publication/hindi%20oct-dec-11.pdf>
4. "Leek se Hatkar Bhuvaneshwar ne Racha Sahitya ka Sansar." *Amar Ujala*, 2021.
5. <https://www.amarujala.com/uttar-pradesh/varanasi/bhuvneshwar-prasad-created-the-world-of-literature-out-of-the-box-city-news-vns5957814184>
6. Margret, V.G. *Hindi Drama and Theatre*. The University of Calicut,
7. [http://sdeuoc.ac.in/sites/default/files/videos/ilovepdfmerged%20\(14\)compressed%20\(1\).pdf](http://sdeuoc.ac.in/sites/default/files/videos/ilovepdfmerged%20(14)compressed%20(1).pdf)
8. Pathak, Sameer Kumar. "Bhuvaneshwar Ek Genius Lekhak ki Yaad." *Jankipul*,
9. 2020, <https://www.jankipul.com/2020/07/bhuvneshwar-a-genius.html>
10. Prasad, Bhuvaneshwar. "Tambe Ke Keere." *Aath Ekanki*, edited by Devendra Raj Ankur and
11. Mahesh Anand, Vaani Prakashan, 2012, [https://content.kopykitab.com/ebooks/2016/02/5909/sample/sample\\_5909.pdf](https://content.kopykitab.com/ebooks/2016/02/5909/sample/sample_5909.pdf)

13. Prasad, Bhuvaneshwar. *Karvan Tatha Anya Ekanki*. Lokbharti Prakashan, 2004.
14. Rai, Ashwini. "Bhuvaneshwar." *Shoot2pen*, 2020, <http://shoot2pen.in/2020/06/20/Bhuvaneshwar/>
15. Rāya, Satīśa Kumāra. *Ekankikar Bhuvaneshwar ka Yatharthbodh*. Bihāra Grantha Kutīra, 1991.
16. Sharma, Rajkumar, ed. "Bhuvaneshwar Ka Jivan Vritt." *Bhuvaneshwar: Vyaktitva Evam Krititva*, Uttar Pradesh Hindi Sansthan, 1992.
17. Sharma, Rajkumar, and Mandeep Kaur. "Pratibha ka Vivah." *Bhuvneshwar ka Sansar*, SerialNo. 3,
18. Aakashwani Rampur, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HoFEtCyD3LU>
19. ---. "Shaitan." *Bhuvneshwar ka Sansar*, Serial No. 4, Aakashwani Rampur, 2021.
20. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JjeqNrdlQ\\_A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JjeqNrdlQ_A)
21. ---. "Shayama: Ek Vaivahik Vidambana." *Bhuvneshwar ka Sansar*, Serial No. 6, Aakashwani.
22. Rampur, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=12zKIVXOaiM>
23. ---. "'Ek Samyahin Samyavadi." *Bhuvneshwar ka Sansar*, Serial No. 9, Aakashwani Rampur, 2021.
24. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HCEg9X\\_rTIw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HCEg9X_rTIw)
25. Yayawar, Bharat. "Dandy Among Fakirs: Bhuvaneshwar," translated by Ravinandan Sinha, *Hindi:*
26. *Language, Discourse, Writing*, Vol. 6, No. 4, October-December 2011, pp. 13-21, <http://www.mgahv.in/Pdf/Publication/hindi%20oct-dec-11.pdf>