

LIFE &  
TIMES

SUNDAY, AUGUST 28, 2016

# PLUSH

## Entwined in harmony

A POET-PATRIOT PAYS TRIBUTE TO MERDEKA  
PAGES 2&3

ART PAGES 6&7

OF ANGST  
AND ART

HERITAGE PAGES 8&9

REMEMBERING  
THE DEPARTED

BEATS PAGE 14

DATO SHAKE  
ONAF

BROUGHT TO YOU  
BY LIFE & TIMES

## PLUSH people



# A POEM A DAY KEEPS DOCTOR AWAY

MP Prabhakar's poetry is a lyrical account of his life events and inspires a sense of patriotism, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

**A**T the height of World War II, in a small Johor town, a 10-year-old office boy learns a life lesson. The Japanese manager in the company where the boy works is in charge of making sure that cars and trucks are repaired and sent to the warfront in Burma (now Myanmar).

The clerical staff struggle to understand his instructions because they don't know Japanese. The boy, having learnt Katakana at the Japanese school, understands some of these instructions and helps the staff carry them out.

"That taught me to always help people in trying circumstances," says Mangot Para Prabhakar (MP Prabhakar). Today, 81-year-old Prabhakar uses such experiences to hone a skill he's developing, writing poetry.

In fact, the experience he recalled above is chronicled in his poem, *The Green Bicycle* which is part of a compilation of 39 poems in a hardcover book called, *Lasting Impressions*. The book was self-published and launched in July.

Offering me a copy of the book, Prabhakar explains that the sequence of the poems reflect, the various stages of his life. Thumbing through them, it becomes obvious that on a broader scale, *Lasting Impressions* is also an account of some of the major events in our country's history.

#### A POEM A DAY

Refusing to describe his poems as classical poetry or prose, Prabhakar prefers the term "narrative poetry". They are not his dreamy imaginations or fantasies but based on his personal experiences of human relations, nature and its surprises.

Likening poetry to music, this retired deputy director from the Ministry of Education says that it makes him feel good and calms him down.

Poetry is quite simply a form of therapy; Prabhakar puts it thus: "A poem a day keeps the doctor away."

It all began close to 10 years ago when one of Prabhakar's colleagues was retiring and he was asked to give the farewell speech. A suggestion was made that Prabhakar write and read out a poem instead. The poem he wrote was well-received.

Subsequently, instead of buying his wife, Sarojini, a birthday card with a generic message, Prabhakar wrote her a poem every year. Two years ago, Prabhakar decided to write poems in earnest.

"Every day," he adds, "I look forward to writing a new poem or continuing one I had begun. Also reading one that I had written. Both give me much pleasure."

#### A JOURNEY INTO THE PAST

As expected, Prabhakar's poetry gives us a glimpse of the world he grew up in. In *The Tick-Tock Man*, he writes about a happy childhood with descriptions of a hand-drawn and hooded rickshaw, Orange Crush bottles and trishaw rides. There is one stanza that his wife finds particularly touching and it describes an ice cream treat that Prabhakar's father gave, "after a long walk in the sun."

On Dec 8, 1941 when the Japanese

dropped bombs on Singapore and Malaya, young Prabhakar, his parents and siblings sought refuge with a friend in Kulai's Frazer Estate. The two years he lived there were not without incident.

He tells the story of the time Japanese soldiers appeared at the house, dressed in camouflage, and demanded to know if they were collaborating with the enemy (the British). "It was harrowing. They unsheathed their swords," he says. "Not bayonets. Full swords. Like Samurai."

Shaking his head softly, he adds: "It was terror." Mercifully, the soldiers understood that Prabhakar and family were refugees from another town and left them alone.

#### SAFETY FIRST

Some time later, the family decided to relocate to India for their safety. They left onboard the ocean liner City of Canterbury to Madras (Chennai). The shock of coming face to face with India still evokes funny memories.

One of the first things he had to adapt to was a new method of bathing. "We went to a communal pond. I had to be careful as the steps were slippery. Then, immerse once, apply soap and immerse again. I had to learn to wrap up with a towel quickly. There were people all around. This needed quick fingers and quick thinking."

At school, there were more challenges when Prabhakar had to learn two languages with completely different scripts, Malayalam (his mother tongue) and Sanskrit. Knowledge of the latter has come in handy because today, he reads the Bhagavad Gita. He says: "I find that it is a guide for life. We're tied up in worldly pursuits. The only bliss and joy you can get is from yourself."

The mainstay of his time away, says Prabhakar, was his father's letters to him. Wearing a smile of deep affection, Prabhakar shares: "He would write to me and send magazines like *Young Malayan* and *Life*. These were hard to come by."

After graduation, Prabhakar boarded another ocean liner, Chidambaram for Malaya. Unfortunately, his degree from Madras University wasn't recognised. This prompted another trip overseas, this time to Hull, England to pursue an honours degree, enabling him to work in the Malayan Civil Service. His poem, *The Blue Steel Trunk*, is an account of his long journey to Southampton, via Colombo, across the Arabian Sea, through the Suez Canal, Naples and the Bay of Biscay.

#### INDEPENDENCE

In the summer of 1957, Prabhakar was on holiday in Austria when news broke that Malaya would be granted independence. On the night of Aug 30, 1957, Prabhakar was still in Britain, but followed the events unfolding at the Royal Selangor Club in Kuala Lumpur.

A sense of nostalgia creeping into his voice, he says: "There were two minutes of darkness when the lights were turned off. At the stroke of midnight the lights were turned on again. The Union Jack was lowered and the new flag of Malaya was raised accompanied by the *Negaraku*, the national anthem. Seven chants of *Merdeka* followed. In the morning, at the Merdeka Stadium, the Duke of Gloucester handed Tunku Abdul Rahman the

Instrument of Independence. He read out the declaration and chanted 'Merdeka' seven times with the crowds joining in."

Our discussion is interrupted when Sarojini lets me in on a secret. The moment arrangements for this interview were made, Prabhakar had begun working on A Merdeka Poem.

#### PEACE, LOVE AND HARMONY

Prabhakar returned to Malaya and started his career that has spanned more than 50-odd years. He was a teacher, headmaster, officer in the Ministry of Education and acted as an advisor to students who wanted to study in Britain.

Throughout, it made Prabhakar's day if he succeeded in making his students, or anyone he met feel self-confident and happier. Some of the people who are "so very dear" to him are listed in his poem, Clock Tower Through Royal Palms.

While many of the themes in his poems are based on peace, love and harmony, Prabhakar insists he doesn't have a message in them. Bearing in mind that there is a multitude of interpretations his readers can make about his poetry, Prabhakar says: "[They] must draw their own conclusions, whatever that might be. [It's] never meant to control people's reactions. That is their beauty. Isn't this what makes all this fun?"

Admitting to having a sharp eye for detail, Prabhakar has discovered something quite startling with his poetry. Smiling broadly, he says: "I have found that memory can be improved when applied to something done with passion. This applies to all age groups, but is of particular

relevance to the old and those who think they are old."

Other than having to be good with words, the research that Prabhakar undertakes includes having to think about a particular event, thumb through dictionaries for the right words and how they're spelt, and, when necessary, surfing the internet. Shaking both hands by the sides of his head, he adds: "I've never been so active in my mind like I am now."

Old age, for Prabhakar, has turned out to be the best part of his life. He is now free of worldly encumbrances with all the time to pursue his passions, namely, writing poetry.

Prabhakar's advice to anyone who still remains reluctant to write poetry?

"You won't know until you've given it a try."

**"I have found that memory can be improved when applied to something done with passion. This applies to all age groups, but is of particular relevance to the old and those who think they are old."**

*Mangot Para Prabhakar*

## A MERDEKA POEM

*1957, 31st August  
Remembered as the greatest  
Our destiny for us cast  
Nationhood gained at last.*

*With friends in Austria on a holiday  
News of independence made our day  
Tears of joy from us streaming  
Happy but not fully understanding.*

*With full impact dawning  
Woke us up to its full meaning  
Tireless efforts of founding fathers  
Tunku, step by step, did not falter.*

*Merdeka, seven times resounding  
Malaya to this call awakening  
Malays, Chinese, Indians all rejoicing  
A new star in the eastern sky  
A star of freedom rising high.*

*When all this happened, a long way away  
Wished we were in Malaya that day  
The National Anthem and Rukunegara  
Binding us under God and a shining star.*

*Every sentiment having meaning  
In all times sustaining  
We are alive and well today  
Because in harmony we live every day.*

*Best place in the world for unity  
For our continued wellbeing and harmony  
A beautiful land for all to see  
With forests, rivers, beaches and seas.*

**MP Prabhakar  
Petaling Jaya  
August 22, 2016**