

# The long journey of Jose Saramago



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Today (16.11.22) marks the end of the birth centenary of world-renowned Portuguese writer Jose Saramago, who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1998. He is the only one of his kind, who, born at the lowest rung of the society into a poor, landless peasant family, had worked his way up to become a Nobel Laureate. His father was the first member in his family tradition, who was literate, to some extent, working as a policeman in Lisbon.

Saramago, who had been an ordinary student since primary education, could not get higher education. All his poor father could do was to enrol him in an industrial training institute. As an

exception, the institute provided education in French and a little bit of literature too. After education, Saramago kept visiting free libraries and read a lot. Later, he attained mastery in German too. Consequently, he translated 80 world standard books from the two languages into Portuguese.

Starting his career as a car mechanic, Saramago made a foray into journalism. Then he started writing poetry, prose and plays. It is quite a disgrace that his oeuvre celebrated till now has not been completely translated into English.

Saramago joined the Communist party and faced several trials and tribulations, taking part in the party's protest against the fascist rule in Portugal. It was his comrades who protected him inside and outside the prison.

His first novel 'Land of Sin' or 'Country of Sin' ('Terra do Pecado' in Portuguese) was not successful. Yet his second novel went down well with the readers.

It was from his third novel onwards, which revolves around the farmers' uprising against the feudalists, that he crafted his own narrative style – a style that more or less dispensed with all punctuation marks except comma. Asked about this style, Saramago once said it was the farmers' conversational style and while speaking, no farmer would use commas and full stops.

Rejecting the communists' favourite literary style of social realism, Saramago adopted the styles of magical realism and fantasy. Yet he had not failed to capture the struggles of the oppressed people all over the world. Women are delineated with dignity in his novels.

Condemning the U.S. expansionist policy and the neo-liberal economic policy, Saramago was gung-ho about the Palestine liberation and about the Third World people. He had also a sense of affinity with the people in the African countries which were the Portuguese colonies.

He floated the 'Saramago Foundation' with the help of his Nobel prize money and royalties he had earned from his writings. The Foundation has been encouraging young writers and awarding prizes to the best writings, protecting art and literary treasures, conducting literary discourses all over the world and upholding human rights. Marking Saramago's birth centenary, the Foundation has, for the past one year, been conducting seminars and workshops, involving the world-renowned writers, literary critics and historians.

His novel 'The Elephant's Journey,' published in Portuguese and Spanish in 2008 and translated into English in 2010, spins a tale mostly out of real-life incidents, narrating how an elephant with its mahout Subhro travels to Portugal, how it is presented to the king of Austria and how it finally reaches Vienna. The elephant dies there; its leg gets taxidermised and used as a repository of umbrellas. "Humans not respecting co-creatures on the earth are insulting themselves," wrote Saramago.

After publication of the novel, Saramago took his wife, journalists and friends on a tour to the places from Lisbon to Spain where the elephant had travelled.

In almost all his novels, a dog is portrayed as a character.

In Saramago's novel 'Baltasar and Blimunda' with the backdrop of the 18th century Portugal, the two characters help a priest opposing the then rulers design a 'flying machine'. In the trial run, Baltasar flies away in the machine. Later, Blimunda wanders about in search of her husband and steps into Spain at one point of time.

Weaving a tale of fantasy, Saramago had formed a cultural path between Portugal and Spain in the novel. The Saramago Foundation has revived the cultural path and has been taking tourists along the path so they understand the culture and history of both countries.

The cultural path doubles up as a memorial to Saramago.

**Translated by V.Mariappan.**