

Notes

Progressive Writers' Movement and Causes of its Decline

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The Progressive Writers' Association (PWA) had its beginning in the late thirties in India. In fact it was founded by Sajjad Zahir, Mulkraj Anand and others earlier in London. The conference of progressive writers in India was held in Lucknow in 1936 and was inaugurated by noted Urdu-Hindi writer Premchand whose birth centenary is being celebrated this year.

Even the worst critic of the PWA will agree that this movement created new consciousness among creative writers in India. Most of the Urdu and Hindi writers adhered to classical notions of aesthetics and did not display much awareness of social reality around them, much less being critical of existing reality. I am of the opinion that it was not merely a writers' club but a dynamic movement which infused new life in the creative literature.

The classical literature had lost its dynamism and had become totally stagnant. It could hardly inspire the new generation; much less give new direction to them. The classical literature was supportive of the status quo and even where it was not supportive, it failed to display any awareness about changing social reality. Firstly, colonialism had created its own impact in Indian feudal society. Secondly, anti-colonial struggle was creating a new consciousness among people of India.

Feudalism had created a static society. Premchand has very ably portrayed the extreme exploitation of peasantry in his novel *Gaodan*. He was aware of exploitation and oppression of peasantry under the feudal system. The classical literature did not approve of protest against existing reality. It was more pre-occupied with the creation of beauty.

The progressive movement changed all this. It created not only new awareness about existing and emerging social reality but also infused a new sense of commitment among writers to struggle against the exploitative colonial cum feudal system. It is true that the classical literature had traces of this awareness, especially against religious

orthodoxy as in the *ghazal* literature in Urdu but there was no systematic attempt to create awareness for change.

Progressive Writers Association cannot be described as writers' club. There is no concept of awareness, commitment to a cause and struggle for a cause among members of a club. On the other hand, awareness and commitment to struggle for social change were the most fundamental elements of PWA. It is also important to note that the progressive writers' movement emerged in the backdrop of struggle against colonialism for India's freedom.

Lukacs, the noted Marxist intellectual, observes that a writer's awareness can be subdivided into 1) awareness about reality; 2) critical awareness about reality and 3) socialist awareness about reality. It has also been described as realism, and socialist realism. Most of the writers may have awareness about given reality but do not have critical attitude towards it. A minimum requirement is to have critical awareness about the critical reality i.e. the given reality is not satisfactory and must be changed. Yet, the writers may not have any clear blue print for change. He may think change is necessary but may not be able to figure out what kind of or in what direction change is necessary.

Critical awareness is a must for a progressive writer. The next higher degree of awareness, according to Lukacs, is socialist awareness. One who is committed to socialism and to socialist revolution has a clear blue print for meaningful change in the status quo. Thus according to Lukacs a progressive writer must be committed to revolutionary change in society. Mere critical awareness is not enough.

However, in the PWA there were those writers who were not Marxists, or even opposed to Marxism, like Hayatullah Ansari. Hayatullah Ansari, one can say, was critically aware of existing social reality but was not committed to socialist change. He was part of freedom struggle and highly critical of feudalism and colonialism. However, he was member of PWA and actively contributed to it. His stories portray, sensitively, horrible poverty in India of his time and its dehumanising effect on its victims.

Similarly Maulana Hasrat Muhani, noted poet and freedom fighter, gave new turn to Urdu ghazal in early twentieth century by including political subjects instead of just traditional subjects. Hasrat Mohani was critically aware of the objective situation in India and was engaged in struggle for freedom. Later he developed and became one of the founders of the Communist Party in India in 1925. Socialist awareness he was part of PWA in his time.

But there were other writers and poets like, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Sajjad Zahir, Shabbir Hasan Josh, Krishana Chandra, Sardar Jafri,

Ghulam Rabbani Taban, Qurratul Ain Hyder, Ismat Chughtai, Khwaja Ahmed Abbas, Wamiq Jaunpur, Majnun Gorakhpuri, Majruh Sultanpuri, Jan Nisar Akhtar, Kaifi Azmi, Sahir Ludhyanvi, and others who were either in the Communist Party or fellow travellers, as they were known. Naturally all these writers and poets believed in socialism and wanted to change the given society to a socialist society.

These writers and poets made great impact on their readers and won their hearts in favour of changing the status quo. The progressive literature, in fact, became the mainstream literature during that period i.e. from late thirties to early sixties. It ruled over the hearts and minds of India readers for more than thirty years.

Those who stuck to classical or traditional literature lost out and were called as 'reactionaries' dubbed as enemies of change and progress and supporters of feudalism or capitalism, as the case may be. One can say it was no mean achievement on the part of progressive writers. It is also important to note that progressive writers produced most moving literature on partition.

Partition was a great tragedy and progressive writers stood up to this challenge and wrote moving stories, novels and poems. It can be said that the best creative literature on partition was produced by progressive writers only. And in fact during these thirty years referred to above no other literature could survive, at least as far as fiction was concerned. In poetry of course, ghazals were composed both by traditionalists and progressives. Since ghazal's strength lies in symbols, metaphors and allegories, they could be interpreted in various ways and thus, could appeal whether written by traditionalist or progressives. Ghazal's overwhelming message being of love, it tends to be full of humanism. Thus even Mir Taqi Mir and Ghalib were great progressive poets.

II

What led to the decline of PWA in the sixties? Why did it lose its appeal so rapidly? Why did it come to be attacked by the modernists? Were their attacks valid or motivated by anti-socialist or anti-communist stand? These are important questions which should be discussed for an objective evaluation. However, the merit and usefulness of the progressive writers movement should not be written off as many modernists and now post-modernists would like to. Some light should be thrown on this aspect too.

There were causes of decline of PWA in its own structure. A great and appealing literature can never be produced by commands or party dictates. 'Commitment' was very central for progressive writers. However, the question arises commitment to what and unfortunately

after few years Communist Party began to control progressive writers' movement and commitment to the cause of socialism became commitment to the party program and in progressive writers' conference discussion were tightly controlled by the party leaders. Even the nature of resolutions to be passed were decided by the party?

Those who deviated from the party line though remaining believers in the socialist cause, were denounced as 'heretics' and were expelled from the movement. The Bhivandi conference of progressive writers developed internal differences and some writers like Khawaja Ahmed Abbas and others were expelled. This was unfortunate.

A writer is committed to freedom of his/her conscience and to the cause his/her conscience accepts. Freedom of conscience is the most important assets of a writer or a poet and with this freedom one choose the cause. If a writer or a poet is sought to be controlled by a party or an external organization, he/she cannot produce great and worthy literature.

Though commitment is very vital for producing great literature, commitment has to with the cause and cause alone. Freedom of choice plays very important role for a committed writer. This commitment should never be reduced to commitment to an individual or a clique, and freedom of the writer should never be compromised. It is through his/her freedom of conscience and creative response to the challenges arising from the status quo that a writer or a poet produces best literature.

The party deprived the writers of this freedom of conscience and instead wanted them to follow the party line and so the commitment to socialist cause become commitment to the party line. This was one of the important reasons for the decline of PWA. In a democratic state like India such commitment to party line by creative writers could not work. Those who were opposed to communism attacked progressive writers' movement in the garb of attack on commitment itself.

A new trend in literature called *jadidryat* (modernism) started the sixties. It attacked progressive writers' movement not only as outdated but as party propaganda literature. The modernist attacked the concept of commitment itself and maintained that a creative writer (or a poet) cannot be in omitted to anything, much less to social or economic causes. Creative literature is nothing but expression of one's own inner self and innermost feelings.

A section of modernists also maintained that life has no meaning, it could even be absurd. Life need not be taken seriously and has no direction. A writer simply expresses himself through his writings and is in no way obliged to express any human cause. Thus the modernist literature tended to be even absurd and absurdity was even celebrated. French playwright wrote a drama called *Waiting for Godot* showing how

meaningless life was and we are all waiting for something, which we do not know what it is.

There were acrimonious debates between progressive writers and the modernists. The progressive writers maintained that commitment was very important to their writing and life was neither meaningless nor absurd. It has to be taken seriously and has to have meaningful direction. Life is sacred and must be enriched through literature. Human dignity must be respected and preserved. And human dignity can be preserved only through just social system. Poverty and hunger are degrading and must be removed from society. A writer should be committed to social justice and must accept socialist realism and disseminate it through his creative writing or poetry.

However, often this commitment, as pointed out above, became commitment to party program and thus lost its deeper appeal to the readers. This should also be accepted that despite merits and demerits the modernist movement gave a jolt to progressive writers and many of them began to change their attitude. They began to experiment with new forms and began to assert their independence.

During the earlier period very talented writers like Sa'adat Hasan Manto or Akhtarul Iman, Rajender Singh Bedi etc. were denounced as 'heretics' and expelled from the movement as they asserted their creative independence. Now these writers again became acceptable to the progressive writers. In a way the harsh criticism by modernists did prove to be blessing in disguise.

However, the movement could not revive and has not been able to regain its past glory. Its decline has become an accepted fact. In fact any movement passes through various phases and in the beginning it is generally the most vigorous. No movement remains steady throughout. PWA also created great stir in its earlier phase which was the most challenging period as the colonial challenge evoked great response from the writers.

After independence the challenge of colonialism disappeared and that dampened enthusiasm of many writers who were drawn to the movement mainly for the struggle for freedom. They were not as enthusiastic in the post independence period as they were before. Many who were committed to communism also began to compromise with the 'bourgeois government' in the interest of their own career or personal benefit.

Subsequently the communist movement itself split in the sixties after the Chinese invasion. It also resulted in splitting the progressive writers' movement. The CPI (M) set up its own *Janawadi Lekhak's*

movement. Thus not only Communist Party but also the writers' movement was also divided weakening it seriously.

When Indira Gandhi gave slogan for quit poverty in 1968, nationalized banks and emphasized socialist goals many progressive writers began to support her enthusiastically and even accepted posts in the Congress party or its front organizations. Some prominent writers like Krishna Chandra, Khawaja Ahmed Abbas, Balraj Sahani, Sardar Jafri, and others even supported emergency in 1975 as CPI was supporting emergency. It was also a fatal mistake. Moreover, there was never any honest critical appraisal of the mistakes without which no movement can be revived again.

In the late eighties Soviet Union itself collapsed delivering fatal blow to socialism. This brought great disillusionment among committed writers and many thought that socialist alternative is no more available. And now it has become all the more difficult in view of globalization, which has brought lot of benefits for a section of middle class. But this is also a chance for building up the movement. Globalization is giving rise to sharp contradictions. It is also bringing great misery for the working classes and peasantry. But the movement cannot be built on old lines. New challenges demand new ways to meet the crisis. The World Social Forum is talking of alternate world and progressive writers have to come forward to make this new and alternate world possible. It demands once again sincere commitment to create this awareness among the people and to inspire them with their creative writings to wage struggle for this other world. A new manifesto is needed. The old manifesto is dead and gone.