

LABOUR REVOLUTION AND LITERATURE

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The most important characteristic that not only sets apart human beings from other living beings but also much superior to them is the faculty of creativity. A type of creativity is also evident among the lesser living beings like bees, sparrows and even ants. But they create not consciously according to a pre planned design as do the human beings. The non-humans create their honey combs or nests or mud abodes according to their instincts evolved through millions of years. They don't improve or innovate their creations and go on repeating the same process for generations after generations. But the humans as Karl Marx pointed out first create their design in their mind and build it accordingly as the next step. Such conscious creation may also be designated as labour or praxis. The human progress from the hunters and gatherers to the tool using and tool making animals is a saga of continuous improvements, innovations, explorations and even revolutions in tool making and productive practices.

The human creation may be divided into various categories, but these various categories can be broadly divided into two types. The first one of course is the creation of products and goods for their bare lively hood. The other category can be designated as mental, intellectual or spiritual. Food, cloth, houses, vehicles etc belong to the former category. Literature, art, philosophy etc belong to the latter. Though the division into these two categories should not be considered as water tight compartments this division helps us to analyze and understand the phenomena more clearly.

Among the mental creations literature or the art hold the prime place, though painting architecture sculpture stage performance etc have there own special characteristics and claim their higher or lower rungs in the hierarchy according to the taste and inclination of the viewer. The supreme position enjoyed by the literature is hard to deny.

In literature also there are countless styles, movements and genres. But here also there are two broad categories – the folk and the elite. Though modern revolutions in communication are fast blurring the border lines of these categories still, class, caste, national, ethnic and gender differentiations are too deep to be wished away. Art and literature, along with other products of human creativity are as old as humans from the stage of homosapiens itself. But in the earliest stage of the society which is generally described as primitive communist, i.e. before class caste and other distinctions appeared, there was only one class of art and culture which we now describe as folk. The art and culture of the primitive society was inextricably intertwined with their productive practices, value systems and forms of leisure and entertainment. Their art and other performances, whether magical dances, collective recitals, rock paintings or decorated vessels were all added to the delight of productive labour and equitable consumption.

As the means of production and productive practices improved and instead of the old subsistence economy a society of surplus economy began to emerge. Class divisions

also began to appear. Naturally certain individuals and groups with superior knowledge and capacity for knowledge creation came to occupy positions of power. With this advantage they began to appropriate the surplus product and the surplus value became crucial in social structure. These groups which appropriated the surplus value became chiefs, priests and even kings which led to the formation of state structure which was used by the ruling classes to oppress and exploit the downtrodden. All these opened up the era which we call historical, the preceding eras being pre-historical.

The appearance of the division in society also led to a division in the forms of art and culture. It would not be etymologically correct to call the tales, stories, proverbs and myths of these periods as literature. Literature is what is written down in letters or alphabet. The alphabet or the material symbols of oral communication cannot claim a history of more than six thousand years. But our folk tales, songs, myths and other verbal articulations are perhaps tens of thousands of years old. But still for convenient sake we call them literature, which is folk literature. Folk forms of literature and art continued even after the invention of alphabet. Therefore they tended to be written down but still the most important characteristic of folk literature is its oral character and anonymous authorship. This anonymity also means the collectivity of authorship. Though the class of literature and art described as folk began to be corrupted by the elitist traditions and ideology as close analytical reading and viewing will bring out essential folk ideology. Modern folklorists have devised many techniques to clear up the draws and extracts the living essence of the folklore.

The process of corruption and distortion of folklore went ahead and was consciously articulated by the new ruling classes to justify their dominant power and to domesticate the downtrodden classes in favour of domination. Thus began the career of the elite ruling class art - classic art. In the process of corruption the elite evolved very sophisticated method of expression and articulation. Though they rejected the folk art as crude and low-brow, they absorbed the great wealth of peoples art to the maximum possible extent as Maxim Gorky correctly points out all the ancient epics and classics of high-brow art like Homer, Valmiki or Vyasa had all basically sprang up from the fountain heads of folk art. It is only after many generations that these folk creations were collected edited chiseled with ample interpolations to suite the interest of the ruling class. Valmiki's *Ramayana* considered to be the first mahakavya of the Indian culture makes it explicitly clear that it was sung by wandering minstrels from one end of the country to another enlightening and entertaining princes and peasants alike. The famed author of *Mahabharatha* is the sage Vyasa. Modern scholars tell us that etymologically the word Vyasa means an editor or compiler.

The division between the folk and elite literature and art does not mean that they flowed on parallel lines throughout. In the history of art and literature, like in all history there are periods of decadence and renaissance. The decadence affects the elite literature as the ruling classes face crisis and even loss of power occasionally. In such period of decline art becomes stereotypes, repetitive exercises like all other organic phenomena life comes to a dead end when new blossoms fail to appear and old blossoms fade and wither. As in general history in the history of literature also the winter of decline soon gives way to the spring of renaissance. Renaissance of literature and art are always a creative blend

of some undying strains of elite traditions with the ever-blooming styles of popular or folk culture. Dante, the harbinger of Italian renaissance took up the existing Christian theology of Aristotelian Thomas Aquinas and expressed it in popular Italian language instead of adopting the prevailing custom of writing in the dead classical language of Latin. Modern English and modern Russian also came into there on through the same practice adopted by Chaucer and Pushkin. All the modern Indian languages took its present form from the renaissance poets of Bhakthi movement (7th to 15th century) who extracted suitable traditions from ancient epics and puranas in Sanskrit and selectively retelling them in the 'Vulgar' vernacular. Krittivasas in Bengal, Sarala Das in Orissa, Kabir and Thulasidas in Hindi, Narasimh Rao in Gujarat, Tukaram and Namdev in Maharashtra, Basaveswara and Aka Mahadevi in Karnataka, Nainars and Alwars in Tamil, Ezhuthachan and Poonthanam in Malayalam are a few names who brought about the renaissances and laid the foundations of modern Indian polity and culture.

Closely following different and other democratic revolutions in Europe spelt the end of neo classicism and inaugurated the romantic movement of Goethe, Heine, Wordsworth, Shelly and Byron making poetry the torch bearer of democracy and transforming poetry from an elitist exercise to popular ballads and freedoms clarions. The beginning of the working class movements and ideas of socialism in the nineteenth century Europe swept away the romantic and individualistic fantasies from the centre stage and set on the highroad of realism. In all these transformations we can easily perceive the decisive influence of the traditional folk art and literature. This new advance of peoples and working class literature which was fuelled into a prairie fire by the spread of printing and media. The literacy movement which sprang up as a part of democratic revolution and socialist struggles also was an important factor which gave new dimensions to people's culture and literature.

Another factor which came to the fore first with the romantic movement and then with the realist upheaval was the relative importance of prose literature and the rise of novel and short story as a more popular medium for men and women of talent. Emile Zola, Flaubert and Balzac in French, Dickens, Hardy and Jane Austen in English, Gogol, Chekhov, Tolstoy and Gorky in Russian etc are a few of the exemplary practitioners of outstanding prose literary discourse.

The process of the ways of literary and art transformations from classicism to realism in Europe took place in the span of a few centuries, say three to four centuries. The modernization in third world countries like India were industrialization democratization and the rise of working class had to be telescoped into shorter period of decades due to historical and other reasons which lies beyond the scope of this note. Indian renaissance which also gave birth to spread of print technology news paper media and inevitable dominance of prose discourse past through all these stages with special Indian characteristics. First the renaissance and then the national movement and finally working class movement acted as the fountain heads of these literary and artistic advances.

The first blossoms of renaissance appeared in the nationalist novels of Bankim Chandra Chaterjee in Bengal followed by Bharathendu Harishchandra in Hindi,

Arumugha Naveler in Tamil Chandu Menon in Malayalam, Prem chand in later Hindi, Fakir Mohan Senapati in Oriya and others. It is very significant that Fakir Mohan Senapati in Oriya considered to be the father figure of modernization of Oriya literature wrote the first India novel with the peasant class struggles as the theme – *Seven Acres*. With the dawn of the 20th Century along with the anti castiest reform struggles and working class struggles and peasant revolts began to be a major theme of literature in various Indian languages. Perhaps the first work on with peasant class struggle as theme was the play *Neel Darpan* in Bengali which was later banned by the alien rulers. Close on its foot steps came a number of ‘darpan’ (mirror) dramas depicting the plight of various exploited classes like the fisher folk, the tribals etc.

The close connection between working class resurgence and radical art is exemplified by the fact that most of the outstanding leaders of working class ideology and revolution were themselves either poets dramatist painters or literary and art critics. Marx and Engels began their revolutionary career as adolescent poets though they gave up writing poetry and confine themselves to literary criticism in their late life. Plekhanov, Lenin and Trotsky were eminent art critics. Mao and Ho Chi Minh were poets of no mean standards. In India the leading lights of the labour and socialist movements like Muzaffer Ahamed, M N Roy, EMS Namboothiripad, P C Joshi, Sajjad Saheer were all eminent leaders of literary movements and literary critics.

Subhramanya Bharathi (Tamil) Khasi Nazsrul Islam, Maha Swetha Devi, Savithri Roy (Bengali) Sajjad Saheer, Kishan Chander, Josh Malihabadi (Urdu) Prem Chand, Sumitra Nandan Panth (Hindi) Vallathol Narayana Menon, Pandit Karuppan (Malayalam) and dozens of outstanding Indian men and women of literature were admirers of October Socialist Revolution and supporters of working class movement and their sympathy and convictions gave their creations unusual flavours and fire. The founding of the India Progressive Writers Association in 1936, Indian Peoples Theatres Association (IPTA) in 1942 and various language associations gave a forum for the progressives to exchange their ideas and enrich their works.

Kerala is considered as one of the citadels of Indian working class and communist movement. The most outstanding leader of the Kerala working class movement as we have already seen with EMS Namboothiripad an eminent literary critic and cultural activist. One of the most important works of art which played a great role in the rise of the peasant movement in Kerala was a play called *Pattabhakki* or Arrears of rent written by K Damodaran one of the four founding members of Communist Party in Kerala . It was performed on hundreds of stages as part of the peasant rallies. His next work was *Rakthapanam* (a drink of blood) which dealt with trade union movement. In 1936 Mahakavi Changampuzha wrote the famous poem *Vazhakkula* (Bunch of Banana) which was the first Malayalam literary piece on class struggle. Kumaran Asan who is considered to be the father of modern Malayalam poetry devoted some of his excellent works to condemn castiest hierarchy and extol the virtues of untouchable agriculture workers. The great short story writers and novelists who rose to fame on the wings of progressive writers association like Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, Ponkunnam Varkey, Cherukad, Bashir, SK Pottakad and poets like Vylloppally, Edasseri, ONV Kurup, Vayalar, Thirunelloor Karunakaran and others were committed revolutionary socialist

writers who were derided as party propagandists have now become universally accepted poets and writers. If Kerala is a Red state the credit for transforming it into that state goes equally to men and women of letters as to the political and class activists.

Indian Progressive Writers Association drew its inspiration from the World Writers Congress against Fascism held in Paris, 1936 under the leadership of Romaine Roland and other world figures like Gorky. The working class art, poetry, novel, dramas, songs have a brilliant tradition. The most famous working class song of revolution is the French marching song *The International* which was composed as the battle cry of Paris Commune (1871). It was written by a communard Eugene Pottier. It is still sung by the working class and progressive humanity across the world in dozens of translations. Let us conclude this note by quoting the stirring words of Pottier:

Rise up, the curs'd of every nation,
In all your hunger-gaols arise!
The lava-roar of liberation
Erupts at last to storm the skies.
Wipe out the past of want and sorrow;
The house of slavery shall fall,
And we will build a great tomorrow;
We who are nothing shall be all!
There is no saviour high above us,
No judge, no emperor, no God.
We, workers, know the way they love us,
And only we can will our good.