

# National Context of Progressive Movement

*Murli Manohar Prasad Singh*

## Introduction

This article looks at the national spread of the progressive literary movement in India, by mapping its evolution in three specific linguistic contexts. The essay illustrates the nationwide movement in literature by illustrating the experiences in three languages- Bangla, Punjabi and Telugu. A few caveats are important here. First, since an independent article on the origin and development of the progressive movement in Hindi and Urdu literature is being included in this collection, it has not been discussed here to avoid repetition.

Second, there may be independent articles on other Indian languages like Tamil, Malayalam, Odia, Kannad, Marathi and Gujarati. Since I am not an expert of the literary history of these languages' I am not making an assessment of the impact of the progressive movement on them. The Progressive Writers' Association had established its branches not only in Bangla, Punjabi, Telugu and Malayalam but in Marathi, Kashmiri, Pashto, Sindhi, Santhali, and Uraaon and tribal languages and dialects of the north east. My focus on specific languages does not privilege the role of these languages in the national movement and nor does it suggest the absence of an equally prolific and effervescent movement in other languages and regions.

This article has four parts. While the three parts trace the development of the progressive literary movement in Bangla, Punjabi and Telugu literature, the fourth part gives a brief account of progressive movement that spread nationwide and its influence on the literary fields.

So, description of the progressive movement in these languages merely serves as an illustration of the evolution of the nationwide cultural movement during the decades between 1930s to 1950s. Subscribers to the Hindi-Urdu progressive literature had only a vague idea about the activities of the movements in other languages. But people had no concrete information about the prolific writers of Bangla, Telugu, Malayalam and Punjab languages. They also did not know how this movement spread.

## I

The Novels of Manik Bandopadhyay, Satindra Bhaduri, Samaresh Basu, Sulekha Sanyal and Nanni Bhaumik were discussed at that time as examples of the constantly active progressive movement in Bangla literature. Real life situations depicted in their works was to inspire a new generation to adopt democratic-socialist attitude to life. Apart from story-writing, poetry writings of Vishnu De, Arun Mitra, Samar Sen, Manindra Ray, Amiya Chakrabarti, Virender Chattopadhyay, Subhash Mukhopadhyay and Sukant Bhattacharya had completely freed the Bangla poems from the influence of Tagore, Jeevanand Das and the magazine *Kallol*. Though the magazine *Parichay* was not strictly a magazine of poetry, it played a very active role in popularising the use of realism in poetry. It also contained information about Marxist aesthetics and progressive ideology over which discussions and discourses were often held so that progressive criteria for evaluation of literature can be developed. Bijan Bhattacharya's play *Navann*, Shambhu Mitra's play *Raktkarbi* and Utpal Dutt's play *Angar* depict the thrills, struggles and anguish of the society existing in that period. These works continue to be the source of information about those times for Bangla readers till today. Songs of Jyotindra Maitra, Hemanga Biswas, Binoy Roy and Salil Chaudhary left their impact not only on Bengal but all over India. Besides them, Somnath Hore, Jainul Aabdin and Chittoprosad depicted very poignantly the penury of rural areas caused by famine and feudal disputes in Bengal through their sketches and paintings. Such was the impact of these images that the new generation of artists came to devise new ways to depict new, untouched scenes from the reality of life. Photography also had the same effect. During and after the Bengal Famine, Sunil Janah went from village to village to learn about the pathetic condition and made a series of photographs to depict them. The combined effect of this new realism in various art forms was best seen in the elevation of Bengali cinema, which became the most popular motor to represent these trends. As a result, films of Nimai Ghosh, Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen were recognised as classical movies. These changes in the Bangla cultural scenario continued to influence entire Bengal from 1936 to 1960.

All these authors, artists, filmmakers and musicians had deep associations with the organised progressive movement. They were also cognizant of the fact that it was the Communist Party of India that was the real inspiration behind these movements. None of them ever raised any question on the use and impact of foreign ideas, foreign science and technology, since such questions were based on a false conscience.

## II

Just as the progressive movement became hegemonic in Bengal, Punjabi literature too experienced the flourishing of similar trends and ideas.

After 1930, Punjabi literature had already seen its natural rise in realistic fiction. Writers like Gurbaksh Singh Preetladi, Sujan Singh and Sant Singh Shekhon were considered to have made a significant contribution in promoting this genre. Besides them, Nanak Singh and Kartar Singh Duggal have written in both the genres i.e. novels and stories. These writings are memorable as a legacy of the progressive movement.

Nanak Singh apart from fiction writing, also wrote poems that led to his imprisonment by the repressive British colonial government. His famous poem 'Jailiawalan Di Baisakhi' was written during the peak of colonial repression. In poetry writing, the progressive Punjabi poets like Mohan Singh, Gyani Heera Singh Dard, Lalsingh Dil, Santram Udasi etc. were also respected as famous public singers as they had emerged as representatives of people's voice. It was this progressive poetic tradition in which revolutionary poets like Pash flourished.

Among the Punjabi fiction writers of the new generation, Jaswant Singh Kanwal and Gurdiyal Singh also received immense popularity. Jaswant Singh Kanwal's novel '*Raat Baaki Hai*' and Gurdayal Singh's '*Aahan*' are memorable pieces of writing.

A comparative study of Urdu, Hindi and Punjabi literature reveals that Punjab was the biggest centre for the progressive literary movement. There were writers in Lahore, Amritsar, Jalandhar, Ludhiana and Patiala who wrote in all the above three languages and their communication with each another contributed a lot in establishing various branches of the subsequent, Progressive Writers' Association. On the one hand, Sajjad Zaheer was exerting himself in two cities of U.P. i.e. Lucknow and Allahabad to set up an association, expand its branches and encourage realism in writing, on the other hand he also made frequent visits to Amritsar and Lahore so that he could start and develop progressive movement in all the three languages i.e. Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi.

In Amritsar, Sajjad Zaheer was formulating an action plan with Mahmuduzzafar and his wife Rashid Jahan. His book *Raushnai* (The Light) mentions many events in this regard. With the efforts of Mahmuduzzafar and his wife Rashid Jahan, Sajjad Zaheer came in contact with the young *shayars* (Poets) Faiz Ahmad Faiz and Ustad Daman. Besides, they reached Lahore as per their own schedule and meetings were held with people from different walks of life with the help of Iftikhar Khan. By chance, there was a party on that day in which 20-25 people were present. Sajjad Zaheer had

thought that he would meet Bashir and reminisce about the old days they had spent together in London and Oxford. So, everyone attended the party. Describing the atmosphere of the party, in *Raushnai* Sajjad Zaheer says:

Shortly, I felt that the standard of noble society of Lahore is much higher than the educated society of Lucknow and Allahabad. These people were not only healthier but more handsomely dressed up and spoke English more proudly.

On the same night, he met Bashir who commanded respect as the publisher-editor of *Humayun*. Since he was a supporter of the Muslim League, his relation with Sajjad could not flourish. After this, Sajjad Zaheer met many writers of Lahore at their homes with the help of Faiz. Ghulam Mustafa 'Tabassum' and Akhtar Sheerani were among the writers whom he met. Sajjad Zaheer writes about 'Tabassum' Saheb: "Since the very beginning of the progressive movement in Punjab, his literary interest and generosity helped it so much to flourish there that no other person could do." During these days, a meeting was held in Lahore in which Abdul Majeed 'Salik', Chirag Hasan 'Hasrat', Bashir Ahmed, Tabassum, Firozdeen 'Mansoor' and Rasheed were present. After a long debate, all of those present agreed to the manifesto of the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA) and signed it. Few years after the meeting, Sajjad Zaheer felt:

Writers and poets like Krishan Chander, Faiz, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi, Mirza Adeeb, Zaheer Kashmiri, Sahir Ludhiyanvi, Fikr Tanusvi, Arif, Hans Raj Rahbar, Upendranath Ashk, etc., had raised the banner of progressive literature so high that its radiant heights became the envy of writers in the other parts of our homeland.

In Punjab, there was a very favourable atmosphere for development of the progressive movement in Urdu literature. There was also a fertile ground for the same in Hindi, Punjabi and Kashmiri languages. As a result of the massacre of Jalianwala Bagh, Punjabi writers, intellectuals and artists were naturally coming forward towards making a mass culture, showing solidarity with one another in their fight against the British empire. The PWA enriched and expanded progressive, democratic and cultural activities in an organised way.

### III

Before linguistic division of states, there were three different political orders in Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Aurangabad. Areas under the direct control of the British colonial authority saw more rapid development of the progressive movement in Telugu literature in comparison

with other languages. At the same time, the Nizam of Hyderabad who had direct control over Telangana created obstacles to the development of progressive movement in Telugu literature there. Despite all these obstacles, progressive movement in Urdu and Telugu literature developed quickly. With cooperation from the writers of Bombay and Pune, the new progressive movement gained strength in Marathi speaking Aurangabad region. After the First World War, an era of realistic literary writing had already begun; focusing on the two main enemies (British imperialism and Nizam supported feudalism), the cultural movement was to acquire a revolutionary public nature in Telangana. This realistic literature got a new direction with the appeal from the PWA, formed after 1936. In Telangana, progressive movement was gaining momentum under the leadership of Sri Sri. At the same time it had also seen quick development in Urdu literature under the leadership of Makhdoom Mohiuddin.

Though realism had started before 1936, there was still an influence of romanticism in Telugu literature. There were realistic and revolutionary writers who wrote anti-romantic literature. The writings of Sri Sri, Shishtala, Pattabhai and Narayan Rao are considered to be memorable. In 1934, Sri Sri's collection of poems called 'Maha Prasthanam' was published. Just as Suryakant Nirala, Sumitranandan Pant and Premchand are considered to be forerunners of the progressive movements in Hindi, so is Sri Sri famous as an exponent of the progressive movement. Sri Sri's famous poetic lines are:

*"Aj, aj hi  
Manav jati mein parivartan  
Nav jivan ka shubh lakshan –abhyuday"*

(The change in mankind today and today itself is an good indication for new life- abhyuday).

It is notable that it was Sri Sri who used the word 'Abhyuday' for the first time to represent the idea of progressiveness. Defining the poem with this spirit he used to say:

*"Gatimay, gatidayak  
Swayam badalti, auron ko badalti  
Gati, gavvati  
Age, aur age le jane vali  
Sampurn jivan dene wali"*

(Such poems are those which are dynamic, self changing and also capable of changing others. They sing and make others sing and look forward to feel the fullness of life )

Most of the progressive poets, writers, playwrights and philosophers of Telugu lived in the coastal areas. These writers did not have to confront the adverse effects of the rightist, repressive administration of the Nizams that the people of Telangana had to face, whether in the realm of education, culture or public rights. A poet named Dashrathi in the Nizam-controlled area of Telangana. His book of poems '*Agnidhara*' was published in 1944 which became a symbolic work for representation of the revolutionary movement of Telangana. In the decade of 1940s, Gangneni's book '*Uday-iani*' was published. Gangneni was also a resident of Telangana.

During the same period of the publication of all these literary writings, books of poets living in the coastal areas of Telangana like Somsundaram's book '*Vajrayuddham*', Agnisetti's book '*Agniveena*', Arudra's book '*Tvamevham*' and '*Sangharshan*' were published. Thus, Telugu writers of both Telangana and coastal areas promoted '*Abhyuday*' or progressive creativity.

Telugu writers promoted progressive movement not only in the field of poetry but also in fiction writing. Unnav Laxminarayan and Dr. Varsireddi Sitadevi are considered to have made the most significant contribution in this field.

#### IV

The impulse of an idea is not only transient, transparent and soft but forceful also. Such an impulse motivated people in all those parts of India where the nationalist struggle was particularly strong. Sometimes, this impulse became forceful and then died down and then it again became forceful- like the heat of the rising sun, the redness of the setting sun and coolness of the full moon.

During the period between 1920-1930, more than one such impulse inspired people. It was ideology of Marxism and Leninism, comprehensive philosophy of historical and dialectical materialism. Indian youth and dreamers were looking at the socialist revolution of Russia with great eagerness and curiosity.

The Progressive Writers' Association which was established in 1936 began to spread its ideology in every part of the country. Since this association has completed 80 years of its inception, we should not only observe changes and dynamism in Hindi-Urdu literature, but also look at the aspect of the cultural stream coming out of our freedom struggle that changed our way of looking at things and understanding them, our way of writing, and speaking.

Highlighting the first struggle for freedom in 1857 which had been

suppressed by the British colonial historians, the progressive movement showed that it was the struggle of the farmers and Indian soldiers against British colonial rule and the East India Company. In the idea of a narrow nationalism we come across many points: the shaky attitude towards the British rule during Bharatendu era, hostility towards the Muslim society and Urdu language and the lament for not reviving the past. Our cultural campaign will have to get rid of all these. We should also ensure many other things i.e. to demolish the regressive racial prejudices, to initiate struggle against capitalistic ideas of economy based on personal interest, exploitation and benefit in line with struggle against imperialism and feudalism. We will have to reiterate our pledge of freedom for farmers, labours and women along with freedom of the nation as part of the cultural movement. It is also important to spread public awareness the science and technology, art and literature so that the progressive movement does not remain to be a matter of intellectual discussion for handful of middle class people only, but other people could also discuss and learn about this movement and become a part of it.

In line with fulfilling their responsibilities, revolutionary changes were made not only in Indian literature but different cultures also after 1936. In the beginning, it was Premchand who was the torch bearer. Later on, Nirala,

Rabindranath Tagore, M. M. Varerker, Takshi Shiv Shankar Pillai etc. also began to follow the same path of realism. All the writers and artists began to use this new realistic genre of creativity in paintings, films, drawings, sculpture, science, education, history etc. This led to a new tradition of critical commentary. All supporters of the progressive movement including Kosambi, Rahul, Faiz, Balraj Sahni, Prem Dhavan, Sardar Jafri, Kaifi, Sahir, Yashpal, Makhdoom, Vamik, Mazaz, Amrit Rai, Firaq, Shamsheer, Trilochan, Nagarjun, Kedar, Muktibodh, Shivdan Singh Chauhan, Ramvilas Sharma and their motivators Sajjad Zaheer, Mulkraj Anand, P.C. Joshi etc. had transformed everything. Even in the early days of independence, Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak, Bimal Roy etc. had made powerful use of realism in their movies.

It is also a reality that after 1950, progressive creativity and thinking began to scatter but despite all its contradictions, this lifeline of culture continued to flow. Today three organisations of writers have their separate existence. All these three organisations maintain strategic unity despite having intellectual struggle among themselves. Still, all the three organisations have been continuing with their struggle against American financed capitalism, big capitalist families and forces of feudalism. There-

fore, the cultural wings affiliated to the reactionary groups find it difficult to challenge the activities of these three organisations through their creative works and critical arguments .

The three writer's organisations have five major responsibilities:

1. To Safeguard the freedom of expression.
2. To provide the young authors a forum for expression of ideas and make concerted effort to revive their art and ideology.
3. To launch a movement to form a national body that can meet the financial needs of the culturists and render them social support during crisis.
4. To counter the reactionary attacks of the ruling group and media.
5. To collaborate with all the small and big cultural organisations and set up a National Federation or Confederation across the country in order to continue the struggle to bring about progressive changes in the policy and regulatory systems of the films, theatres, broadcast, television, electronic channels and government controlled literary-cultural organisations for public interest.

We need to make collective effort to help these three organisations so that they can fulfill all the above mentioned responsibilities. It has become important to recognise the historical needs of today's era.

*Translation from Hindi by Nalin Vikas*