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The emergence of PWA and resurgence of nationalism

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Abstract

The publication of 'Angarey' in 1932 marked the beginning of upsurge of the 'Progressive Writers' Association'. It is a collection of nine stories and a one-act play written by Sajjad Zaheer, Ahmed Ali, Mahmuduzzafar and Rashid Jahan. The stories and the play proved to be a critical punch on the orthodoxy of muslim community. Although 'Angarey' was banned after four months of its publication and fatwa was raised against these four contributors of the book but it had a deep impact upon the contemporary writers of the age which led to the formation of PWA. PWA was a Progressive Literary Movement during Pre-Partition in British India. The members of the movement were left-oriented and advocated their writing against social injustice, orthodoxy and backwardness in the society. The paper analyses the formation of PWA and its influence on Indian literary scene.

Keywords: Angarey, Marxism, IPTA, PWA, IPWA, CPI

Introduction

The thirties of the twentieth century witnessed the growth of radical sentiment in the cultural milieu of the subcontinent [1]. Exploitation, barbarity, suppression and dictatorial authority was mushrooming in the post-first world war period. It took a greater form and the major European intellectuals like Romain Rolland, Henri Barbusse, Maxim Gorky, Andre Guide and Andre Malraux sensed it as the threat of Fascism. People were not allowed to disagree with the government and they were being ruled by the dictators. They were confused by the appearance of a new relentless enemy at the time when struggle for independence has not been won yet. To combat this helplessness, people opted for the anti-fascist struggle with the need for the release of imprisoned leaders and the formation of a truly national government. The local politico-economic atmosphere both in India and abroad, influenced the creative production of that era. Authors, poets and intellectuals felt the urge to use their artistic venture as useful weapons against various kinds of political evils like feudalism, imperialism, Facism etc. They made use of their literary activities to wage a cultural war against the spreading threats. To combat these threats, conferences like – 'The Anti-Fascist Conference' (1927) in Paris and 'The Peace Conference' (1932) in Amsterdam were organized. The intellectuals clearly revealed that now they have decided to utilize their pen as a productive weapon against such dominating political forces. During this period, there was a linguistic, regional and cultural divergence. So, in 1935, Henry Barbusse, Maxim Gorky, Romain Rolland and others convened the 'World Conference of Writers for the Defence of Culture'. Through this conference, they tried to reinterpret the old values to make them suitable for their time. At the same time, The social and political evils like discrimination of caste, class, religion and Nationalism had already set its foot in India. People like Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and Md. Bin Tasir got influenced by the European scene of discrimination and decided to take side of destute and exploited sections of society. In London, the group of Indian Students (Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, Promode Sengupta, Md. Bin Tasir, Jyoti Ghosh and Sajjad Zaheer) started gathering in 'The Cafes and Garrets' in Bloomsbury. They tried to revive their old culture just like Europeans were trying to. In praise of the efforts of those Europeans, Mulk Raj Anand states that- "they did not only defend their old culture, rather, also paved the way for the development of a new one. 'Out of the debris of the past, they tried to build up a national culture to fight against Imperialism, Fascism and Feudalism [2]. Maulana Abul Haq in his presidential address emphasized the importance of reading the traditional literature in order to learn some positive artistic lessons from these.

Thus, they concluded that traditional literature should be dealt with positively yet analytically [3]. Javed Akhtar specifies that –poets like Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Kaifi Azmi, Asrarul Haq Majaz, Jan Nisan Akhtar, Sahir Ludhianvi, Majrooh Sultanpuri, Makhdoom Moinuddin and several others like them did not stick to any particular political ideology. Rather, their main aim was to raise the voice against the imperial belligerence and capitalist exploitation and called for a revolution through their writings.

The uproar to diminish the social and political evils, brought together the intellectual minds on a common platform to raise their voice in favour of humanity which resulted in the publication of '*Angarey*' (*The Burning Coal*). It is the first anthology of Urdu literature, published in 1932. It is a collection of nine stories and a one-act play written by four passionate young revolutionary authors – Sajjad Zaheer, Ahmed Ali, Mahmuduzzafar and Rashid Jahan. They were highly inspired by the socialist ideology. '*Angarey*' is generally considered to have marked the beginning of the Progressive Writers' Movement in Indian Literature. These four writers were influenced by the writings of Virginia Wolf, James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence and Karl Marx. They were critical of conservative elements of Muslim community and the corrosive effects of British Imperial rule in India. They tried to shake the religious orthodoxy by their stories. Most of the stories written by Sajjad Zaheer, the alumni of the Oxford University, dealt with sexual desire and sexual oppression and highlighted the ways that social and religious restrictions unnecessarily damage the human psyche. Through his stories, he criticized the hypocrisy of the maulavis, attacked the religious dogmatism and class oppression. His five stories included in the book were '*Nind Nahi Aati*', '*Jannat Ki Basaarat*', '*Garmiyon Ki Ek Raat*', '*Dulari*' and '*Phir Yeh Hungama*'²⁶ were quite provocative and offensive.

Rashid Jahan, commonly known as '*Angareywali*', dealt with the patriarchal oppression of women. Her play portrays the picture of contemporary patriarchal society where in several ways social and religious codes are used to control woman's mind and body. Through her works she dispensed the repressive world of muslim women and the outdated religious and social dogma in their society. She contributed a story '*Dilli Ki Sair*' (*A Trip To Delhi*) and a One-act play, '*Parde Ke Peechhe*' (*Behind The Veil*). She portrayed the plight of purdah women with great economy and irony. The stories of Ahmed Ali-'*Baadal Nahin Aate*' (*The Clouds Don't Come*) and '*Mahavaton Ki Ek Raat*' (*A Night Of Winter Rain*), questioned the existence of Godliness and delved primarily on the condition of women like domestic violence, sexual oppression, sexual desire and longing experiences of widows. Mahmuduzzafar's story- '*Jawaanmardi*' (*Masculinity*) deals with the treatment of women in the muslim society. Rakshanda Jalil argues that the particular feature of the *Angarey* stories was "to give voice to the unsung people"^[4]. According to Vibha S. Chauhan—"they interpreted various spheres of life in a dynamic through their artistic production"^[5]. Thus, these writers kept at distance themselves from the romantic idealism; rather they tried to typify themselves as the spokesperson of the peasantry, workers and the subaltern people.

Angarey produced the anger in muslim community and fatwa was raised against these four contributors of the anthology. Moreover the authors were given the death

threats apart from being condemned at public meeting and private^[6]. Despite such hostile enmity, the writers were in no mood to come to a compromise or to make an apology. Indeed, Mahmuduzzafar, on behalf of the *Angarey* group, wrote an article—"In Defence of *Angarey*: Shall We Submit to Gagging?" – in which it was made clear that they stood for freedom of speech. They selected the field of Islam, not because they bore in mind any typical hostility towards it; rather, being a part of this Islamic culture, they considered themselves to be in a position to justly mirror the miserable condition of the common people of their community due to several religious dogma and orthodoxies^[7]. A sense of national awareness was evolved among the writers and they decided to sweep aside the regional and linguistic divergence. Hence, in the 1930s All India Literary Association like '*PEN*' (*Poets, Essayist and Writers*) by Sophia Wadia and Herman Ould and '*Bhartiya Sahitya Parishad*' by K.M. Munshi and Kaka Saheb Kalelkar were founded^[8]. This All India Conference was organized to enable the authors to come into the close contact with each other's ideas. This conference led to lay down the foundation of PWA.

From the beginning of the movement, there had been intense debate among the leaders regarding the definition of the term '*Progressive*'. Initially their notion of progress was by no means uniform and very often the term used in a vague way^[10]. The establishment of PWA in the 1930s has been considered to be a benchmark in the cultural scenario of the subcontinent in terms of the '*intellectual break*' brought about by them in the literary arena. Utterly critical of the escapist nature of the traditional literature, they put emphasis on the contemporary socio-political realities^[9]. In this association, famous writers like Andre Malraux, Andre Gide, Aldous Huxley, Thomas Mann and others took part. Sajjad Zaheer, the founder figure of this movement, talks about the historic significance of this assembly as it was the first instance where literateurs, artists and poets from all over the globe, irrespective of their caste, class and creed, gathered together to organize one progressive front to rebel against the reactionary and fascist forces^[11]. This internationalism was one of the most visible traits of the progressive culture^[12]. Sajjad Zaheer explained that the principal objective of the literary movement was to establish cordial relationship among the progressive artists of different linguistic zones of India in order to combat imperialism, feudalism and religious fundamentalism^[13]. The London days prepared the stage for the growth of this movement. Zaheer recalled that initially six or seven enthusiastic youths decided to organize the Indian PWA^[14]. On 24th November 1934, more than thirty students of Oxford and Cambridge, gathered in the back room of London's Nanking Hotel^[15]. They prepared a manifesto which came to be published in the *Left Review* in February 1935 and six months later in *Hans* by Munshi Premchand^[16]. After the publication of this manifesto, the first conference of the PWA was organised on 10th April, 1936, in the Rifa-I-Aam hall Lucknow where seventy five delegates from Madras, Bengal, Punjab, Sindh, Gujarat, U.P. and other parts of the country took part^[17]. In this conference, the progressive manifesto that was prepared in London two years ago, was adopted in which it was stated that Indian society was experiencing a radical change. But in the midst of this radical politico- economic environment, the cultural scenario of the subcontinent was still dominated by

the reactionary element who was usually adopted an escapist stance through their 'baseless spiritualism' and 'perverse ideology' [18]. Sazzad Zaheer defined this movement as a landmark in Indian literature as for the first time, writers from all over the country united to get rid of crucial national problems. The movement rapidly spread in other parts of the subcontinent [19].

Priyamvada Gopal also argues that such wider notion of a progressive cultural front manipulated the young minds of the London based Indian intellectuals and it was manifested in the establishment of the 'All Indian Progressive Writers' Association where writers belonging to diverse political views- from the party line communism of Sajjad to Gandhian morality of Premchand – could present their ideas [20]. Carlo Coppola argues that that the progressive writers gave birth to the 'Socialist Realist Movement' in India. This movement primarily flourished during the 1920s and 1930s. It was the time of the rise of Fascist regimes internationally, global depression, economic depression and racial conflicts. The social realists have created the figurative and realistic images of the 'masses', a term that encompassed the lower and working class, labour unionists and the political disenfranchised. They found their purpose in the belief that art was a weapon that could fight the capitalist exploitation of workers and stem the advance of international Fascism. Writers during the 20th century have written in such an unprecedented way which was only second to the impact created by Mahatma Gandhi [21]. Bhisham Sahni rightly points out that the progressives cherished the past cultural forms as far as such qualities like profound humanism, moral values, projection of natural beauty etc. were concerned. But they also realized that 'blind adherence to tradition' would certainly lead to the development of rigid orthodoxy, casteism, ritualism etc. [22] The Progressives also played a key role to bring about peace and harmony during the tumultuous period of communal anarchy by spreading the message of love and affection through their artistic productions. Contemporary writers like Krishan Chander, K.A. Abbas, Sahir Ludhianvi, Ali Sardar Zafari, Kaifi Azmi and others helped to raise the consciousness of the common people. Thus it may be argued that the progressive writers were able to recognize the dangerous impact of the bourgeois intelligentsia over the common mass [23]. The contemporary writers like Ismat Chughtai, Saadat Hasan Manto, Krishan Chander, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi and Upendra Nath Ashq were highly influenced by this movement and its ideology. Their voices became one of the most astounding voices of the progressives.

Thus, 'Angarey' brought a paradigm shift in the ideologies of intellectuals and lead to the establishment of a common arena for the writers from all over the country. Sajjad found that in the 1943-1944, many young writers were greatly influenced by the progressives and were to play significant role in the movement in near future. The PWA went on accommodating writers and intellectuals not only from progressive background but also from lenient democratic traditions and reflecting the social grim realities in their works appeared as instant task before them. Therefore, the manifesto of IPWA clearly mentioned the need for a literature that would reflect the "radical changes taking place in Indian society" [27]. Moreover, IPWA performed another important historical responsibility to assemble a

radical group of progressive cultural activists who played a crucial role to form IPTA (Indian Peoples' Theatre Association) as the first radical nationalist assembly of the cultural workers of India from all walks of life [28]. In 1943, in the fourth conference of the All India Progressive writers' Association, for the first time it was decided that the progressives should take part in films and radios in order to preach their ideologies [25]. Hence, IPTA (*Indian People's Theatre Association*) was formed in 1943 during the British –rule in India and promoted themes related to the struggle for freedom. The name "People's Theatre" was suggested by the prominent scientist Homi Jahangir Bhabha who was persuaded by Romain Rolland's book on the concept of people's theatre. Historically the movement took place in the form of a manifolded assembly by performing individuals, groups and communities under the evasive organisational covering of IPTA, a mass cultural wing of the Communist Party of India (CPI). Though, operating under the party regulations in order to exercise creative forms of Marxist cultural practices, IPTA never remained a subordinate organisation only but established itself as a promising platform for artists, performers and cultural activists who thought to absorb themselves with newer social experiments. Sudhi Pradhan, one of the eminent activists and a leading historian of IPTA, comments – "IPTA was the only organisation engaged in serious creative activity which attracted ambitious artists with hardly any knowledge of Marxism and People's art" [26] The aim of IPTA was to bring cultural awakening among the people of India. This movement portrayed the contemporary reality through traditional art forms and visual art with modern thought and created awareness for socio-political changes. IPTA triggered a wave of stories, songs and films which challenged the status quo and shaped the ethos and thinking of the countrymen. It produced the films like *'Dharti Ke Laal'* which represent the feelings of dispossessed peasants, *'Wo Subah Kabhi To Ayegi'* representing those people who had lost their everything on that glorious morning of independence, *'Do Beegha Zameen'*, *'Naya Daur'* and *'Mother India'* throwing light on the rotting feudalism. They also emphasized the importance of national unity against the colonial rulers by composing plays, poems and songs. It is interesting to note that with the occurrence of the progressive artist in the film industry, the nature of the movies, their songs, lyrics, screenplays and many other aspects also experienced a qualitative change. Nevertheless, the celebrated movement reached at its peak in the mid 1940s and started to slow down from the late 1950s. A great number of the top-rankers in the IPTA started leaving the organisation only to form various independent theatre and the cultural groups like 'Bahuroopee' and 'The Little Theatre Group'.

Conclusion

The Marxian philosophy did the great impact on the young minds and it worked as a stimulus. 'Angarey' worked as a fuel to lit the fire of awakening into the hearts of many. People now started to speak fearlessly about the oppression and the grim situation of the era. This anthology gave birth to multiple protestors and finally 'Nationalism' got its true meaning. It gave youth a clear perception the prospective to change the present situation and enable them to forecast a specific programme for building a new society.

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