

Stepping Towards Progress: The Progressive Writers' Movement in Late Colonial India

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The emergence of the Progressive Writers' Movement brought about a qualitative transformation in the literary sphere of India in the 1930s. Having been a part of a society full of exploitation due to the poignant impact of colonialism, feudalism as well as imperialism, they refused to be neutral and raised their voices in the support of the downtrodden common people. Profoundly influenced by the Marxist ideology, they made the 'have-nots' the central figures of their stories, plays and poems. Extremely critical of the escapist nature of the traditional literature, they made the contemporary socio-political realities the principal themes of their literary endeavours.

Keywords: *Progressive Writers' Association, Sajjad Zaheer, Angarey, Marxist Cultural Movement, Intellectuals.*

The Thirties of the Twentieth Century witnessed the growth of radical sentiment in the cultural milieu of the subcontinent. The tumultuous politico-economic atmosphere – both in India and abroad – did also have influenced the artistic production of that era. As in Europe, eminent writers like Maxim Gorky, Andre Gide, Andre Malraux and many others utilized their literary activities to wage a cultural war against the growing threat of Fascism, in our country, authors, poets, intellectuals felt the urge to use their artistic endeavours as useful weapons against various kinds of political evils like Feudalism, Imperialism, Fascism etc. In the 1930s, all Indian literary associations like PEN by Sophia Wadia and Hermon Ould and Bharatiya Sahitya Parishad by K.M.Munshi and Kaka Saheb Kalelkar were founded.¹ But a decisive moment took place with the establishment of the All India Progressive Writers' Association in 1936. The founder figure of the movement Sajjad Zaheer explained that the principal objectives of this literary movement were to establish cordial relationship among the progressive artists of different linguistic zones of India in order to combat imperialism, feudalism and religious fundamentalism.²

This paper has four sections. In the first section, we have focused on the intellectual origin of this movement. This section shows how the international cultural milieu of the late 1920s and the early 1930s influenced the young Indian writers. In the second section, we have tried to argue that along with such external influence, the publication of an Urdu anthology, namely 'Angarey' (1932), and the controversy around this book acted as a catalytic agent behind the rise of the progressive movement. The following section makes a brief discussion on issues like the establishment of the Progressive Writers' Association, its ideological orientation, and its attitude towards the traditional

literature. In the final section, the paper seeks to enquire how they defined the term 'progress' in their writings and what kind of social roles did they play during the tumultuous 1940s.

Origins of the Progressive Movement

The rise of such progressive attitude can be attributed to the contemporary politico-economic as well as cultural factors. A sense of national awareness was also evolving among these authors who were initially highly influenced by the Gandhian mass movements³ and also other peasant and working-class movements. Thus, these writers tended to distance themselves from the romantic idealism; rather, they tried to represent themselves as the spokespersons of the peasantry, workers and the subaltern people. A very specific socialist consciousness developed among the progressives, partly due to some national politico-economic upheavals and partly because of some momentous events that took place in the international arena in the first half of the 20th century – like the Bolshevik Revolution⁴, the growth of Fascist ideology, the Great Depression etc.

European leading intellectuals like Romain Rolland, Henri Barbusse, in the post First World War era, sensed the threat of Fascism. Several conferences like the Anti-Fascist Conference in Paris (1927) and the Peace Conference in Amsterdam (1932), organized by such intellectuals, clearly showed that they now decided to utilize their pens as effective weapons against such dominating political forces. In 1935, Henri Barbusse with the help of Maxim Gorky, Romain Rolland and others convened the 'World Conference of Writers for the Defence of Culture'. Famous writers like Andre Malraux, Andre Gide, Aldous Huxley, Thomas Mann and others participated in this conference. Sajjad Zaheer talks about the historic significance of this assembly as it was the first instance where litterateurs, artists, 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.⁵ This internationalism was one of the most visible traits of the progressive culture.⁶

The Indian authors were deeply influenced by the global solidarity of the writers who urged for an egalitarian world. As they had personal experiences about the colonial domination, such solidarity in the literary sphere resulted in the intellectual empowerment of these authors. They were able to realize that the British launched a disguised attack on their culture by depriving them of civil liberties through certain political means. Thus, they started to claim their rights as citizens and refused to be treated merely as subjects. It should be mentioned here that in the first PWA conference, R. S. Pandit in his resolution protested against any kind of governmental restrictions on the freedom of thought and expression.⁷

Moreover, influenced by such international literary movements, the Indian progressives now wanted to establish a pan-Indian literary movement by sweeping aside the regional and linguistic divergence. Mulk Raj Anand remembers how such international conferences had a deep impact over the young Indian progressives like Sajjad who was to organize the first conference of the Progressive Writers' Association in Lucknow in the following year.⁸ 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 Prem Chand – could present their ideas.⁹ However, Anand warned that it would not be sufficient to merely have a national culture against imperialism and fascism. Rather, the Indian writers should attempt to create a new progressive culture to combat not only the colonial masters, but also the reactionary ultra-nationalists and revivalists.¹⁰

The 'Angarey' Controversy

In 1932, the first anthology of Urdu literature, namely 'Angarey' (the Burning Coal), comprised of 9 short stories and 1 play, written by 4 enthusiastic young radical authors, shook the dogmatic superstitious Muslim society. These four authors- Sajjad Zaheer, Ahmed Ali, Mahmuduzzafar, Rashida Jahan – were highly inspired by the socialist ideology. They were utterly critical of religious bigotry. They wanted to revolutionize the orthodox Muslim society by condemning any kinds of inequalities, religious fundamentalism, gender oppression. By their ferocious attack on the existing norms of traditional socio-political and religious institutions through their writings, they paved the way for the establishment of the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA). One of the authors and members of the PWA, Ahmed Ali traced the origin of the Progressive Writers' Movement in the 'enthusiastic discussions' regarding the publication of Angarey.¹¹

While most of the stories written by Sajjad dealt with the religious orthodoxy and even condemned the hypocrisy of the Maulavis, attacked the religious fanaticism and class oppression, Ahmed Ali altogether questioned the existence of the divinity. By portraying the misery of the poor people, Ali argued that in their daily life, they were badly in need of their daily necessities instead of such utopian vision of heaven and god. Mahmuduzzafar, Rashid Jahan in their stories and play dealt with the patriarchal oppression on the women. Jahan's play portrayed the picture of contemporary patriarchal society where in various ways social and religious codes used to control women's mind and body. According to Vibha S. Chauhan, they interpreted various spheres of life in a dynamic way through their artistic productions.¹²

Shabana Mahmud points out that the anti-establishment stance of 'Angarey' stirred the orthodox Muslim population as well as the governmental authorities.¹³ It wounded the entire Muslim emotion by ridiculing the God and his Prophets. The Central Standing Committee demanded that U.P. Government should proscribe this book. Same views had been aired by most of the Urdu news papers and journals which also urged for the ban due to the blasphemous and obscene nature of the Angarey stories. Under such pressure, the U.P. Government was forced to ban the book under Section 295A of the Indian Penal Code.

Moreover, the authors were even given death-threats, apart from being 'condemned at public meeting and private'.¹⁴ 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 dogmas and orthodoxies.¹⁵ In this particular statement, for the first time, mention was made about the necessity of the formation of a league of Progressive

authors in the near future.

Ahmed Ali also mentioned that in spite of such hostility, they were able to spread their message in the society.¹⁶ They emphasized on the plight of the downtrodden, subaltern people in order to create an intellectual environment in which each people of the society would be able to make out the perilous impact of the tyranny of the elite classes and the fanaticisms of the religious leaders. This emphasis on the lives of the subaltern people remained one of the major traits in the literary activities of the progressive authors in the upcoming years. Rakhshanda Jalil argues that this particular feature of the Angarey stories, i.e., to give voices to the unsung people was the most remarkable contribution of the early progressives.¹⁷ Eminent litterateurs from Prem Chand to Saadat Hasan Manto and poets from Faiz Ahmed Faiz to SahirLudhianvi- all of them followed this particular characteristic.

Concerns And Considerations Of The Progressive Writers

The establishment of the 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.¹⁸

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.¹⁹ On 24th November, 1934, more than thirty students of Oxford and Cambridge, to build up an all Indian literary organization, gathered in the back room of London's Nanking Hotel²⁰. 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.²¹ But soon it was felt that it was hardly possible from London to bring the Indian writers of every literary zones under one umbrella. That is why in November, 1935, Sajjad returned India to mobilize the Indian writers to organize the All India Progressive Writers' Association.

The first task was to preach the idea of progressiveness to the authors of different genre and different regions. An all India Conference was to be organized to enable the authors to come into close contact with each other's ideas. The Allahabad branch of the organization played a significant role.²² In these early days, apart from Premchand, personalities like Maulana Abdul Haq, Josh Malihabadi, Munshi Dayanarain also came to support the organization.

The first conference of the PWA was organized on 10th April, 1936, in the Rifa-i-Am Hall in Lucknow where 75 delegates from Madras, Bengal, Punjab, Sindh, Gujrat, U.P. and other parts of the country took part.²³ Bhisham Sahni opines that this conference defined 'the social orientation of literature' and 'the role of the writer'.²⁴ The chairman of the reception committee, Chaudhury Mohammad Ali, in his speech, put emphasis on the importance of establishing branches of the association in the other important cities of India and mentioned about the already formed organizations in places like Lahore, Amritsar, Delhi, Kanpur, Benaras, Aligarh and Allahabad.²⁵ In this conference, the progressive manifesto, 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 usually adopted an escapist stance through their 'baseless spiritualism' and 'perverse

ideology'.²⁶ The progressives considered that their duty was to project this progressive change in their writings through a sense of 'scientific rationalism' and thus, to rescue literature from the conservative reactionaries in order to fight against 'communalism, racial antagonism and exploitation of man by man'.²⁷

Munshi Premchand in his presidential address, delivered in Hindi, rejected the fairy tales or romantic stories as useless for the contemporary circumstances and argued that literature must deal with reality. He prescribed a completely unique notion of beauty which was to be found not in the fantasy of the elite people, but in the life struggle of the commoners. Refuting the 'sentimental art', he called for an art which would be dynamic in nature.²⁸

Sajjad 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. New branches were established in Calcutta, Bombay, Poona, Ahmedabad, Patna etc.²⁹ Carlo Coppola argues that the progressive writers gave birth to the 'Socialist Realist Movement' in India. This new trend came to influence the Indian writers during the 20th century in such an unprecedented way which was only second to the impact created by Mahatma Gandhi.³⁰

However, despite such initial success, in the next year, this movement received a setback due to governmental suppression and weak organization. In a letter dated 12.12.1937, Mahmuduzzafar revealed his anger regarding the depressing situation to Mulk Raj Anand who was living in London at that time. Mahmuduzzafar asked Anand to return to India to reorganize the cultural front. He expressed his anxiety in the following words: "The PWA as a whole is dying, if not dead."³¹ However, the leaders were able to combat this crisis situation. Sajjad mentions that during 1937-1939, 3 conferences were organized, each in a year. The first two were held at Allahabad, while the last at Lucknow.³² In the Allahabad Conference of 1937, they even got the support of the traditionalists like Tej Bahadur Sapru. The conference was presided by Maulana Abdul Haq, Acharya Narendra Deb and Pandit Ram Naresh Tripathi.³³ This conference bridged the gap between literature and politics by bringing the political leaders and writers closer. In this conference, a debatable issue was raised, i.e., what would be their attitude towards the traditional literature? Regardless their critical view of the escapist romantic nature of the traditional literature, the question remained- were they going to abandon the legendary poets like Ghalib or Mir?

Maulana Abdul 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.³⁴ 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.³⁵ They tried to reinterpret the old values to make them suitable for their time. Mulk Raj Anand states that through a positive and constructive criticism of the past, they not only defended 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.³⁶ As far as their attitude towards the legendary Urdu poets of the past was concerned, it can be mentioned that in 1942, the Bombay branch of the PWA celebrated the 'Ghalib Day' to pay their tribute to one of the greatest poets of Urdu literature. Sajjad even argued that only progressives could be the proper inheritors of the positive features of the classical literature.³⁷

They actually criticized the dogmatic superstitious approach of some of the traditional literature which they thought as detrimental to the cause of national and social emancipation. Thus, while the traditional orthodox authors merely dealt with 'husn' (beauty), 'saqi' (lover), 'ulfat' (love), the progressive writers mainly focused on the plight of the 'mazdoor' (workers), 'muflis' (poor), 'jamhoor' (masses).³⁸ Faiz thus refused to confined himself solely in the genre of romantic poetry- '*AurBhiDukh Hai Zamane Mein MohabbatKeSiwa, RahateAurBhi Hai Vasl Ki RaatKeSiwa, ... MujhsePehli Se Mohabbat Meri Meheboob Na Mang*'.³⁹ Similar expression can be found in Sahir's nazm- '*ZindegiSirfMohabbatNehi, KuchAurBhi Hai, Zulf-o-rukhsaar Ki Jannat Nehi, KuchAurBhi Hai, BhookhAurPyaas Ki Mari Hui Is Dunia Mein, Ishq Hi EkHaqueeqatNehi, KuchAurBhi Hai*'.

The 1938 Allahabad conference of the Hindi-Urdu writers earned them huge prestige due to the participation of luminaries like Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore, though could not attend the conference physically because of his illness, blessed the young writers by sending his message, which was read out at the conference. Rabindranath advised that in order to feel the pulse of the society and to achieve the progress, it was the duty of the young writers to mingle with the people. An alien writer, having himself secluded from the society, could hardly be able to produce progressive literature.⁴⁰ It was the greatness of Tagore that while prescribing the right path for the young writers, he did not even hesitate to criticize his earlier works and admitted his mistakes due to his aloofness from the society.⁴¹

Jawaharlal Nehru attended this conference and delivered a speech in which he warned the writers that they should not allow politicians in such conferences as it would affect the creativity of the litterateurs. Nehru admitted that politicians more or less tended to involve themselves in 'petty matters' and this could not solve any bigger problem.⁴² Nehru lamented that while in Europe, writers like Voltaire and others played a key role in bringing about qualitative transformations in the society, in India, apart from Rabindranath and some handful persons, there had been a dearth of such writers. Nehru hoped that this gap was to be fulfilled by the progressives, whose works would aspire the people to reach the ideal goals and such enthusiasm could not be created by the 'utopian writers' having no connection with the realities of life.⁴³ Nehru also turned our attention towards the Hindi-Urdu controversy, one of the most problematic issues the PWA had been dealing with since its inception. According to Nehru, this could only be solved through academic discussions and politicians could never be able to remedy this.⁴⁴

The early progressives sensed the problem while framing the manifesto in 1934 in London. They readily accepted the suggestion of DR. Suniti Kumar Chatterji for the initiation of Roman Script.⁴⁵ They thought that the use of one script for the entire country would help them to solve any narrow sectarian conflicts among the writers of different linguistic zones. But Sajjad clearly showed that the Hindi writers, except Premchand and some others, very often were opposed to the progressive

movement. Premchand on 10th March, 1936, wrote a letter to Sajjad in which he talked about the inferiority complex of the Hindi authors, who treated the progressive movement as a conspiracy of the Urdu writers against them.⁴⁶

Khizar Humayun Ansari argues that though several Hindi writers took participation in this literary movement, majority of the Hindi authors remained sceptical about this movement. From this point, Ansari tries to draw a rather misleading conclusion by stating that PWA remained a 'predominantly Urdu movement'.⁴⁷ Ansari further argues that the leaders of the movement, due to their religious background, were mostly concerned with Urdu.⁴⁸ This argument does not hold ground. Whereas, it is true that in the early phase, apart from Premchand and some others, not many Hindi writers joined this movement, nonetheless, we have to dig deeper to search for the real cause. First of all, eminent personalities like Mulk Raj Anand, Ralph Fox, Hiren Mukherji had taken a crucial role in the growth of the movement since its early days and none of them belonged to a specific religious-linguistic zone. Even leaders like Sajjad Zaheer, Ahmed Ali, Mahmuduzzafar, in spite of being 'muslim', were extremely sceptical of any kind of narrow fundamentalist standpoint. Henceforth, they should not be treated in terms of their particular religious background, rather, their activities and ideological concerns should be given much more importance. For an instance, Maulana Abdul Haq, despite having such title of 'Maulana', always cared for religious tolerance, communal harmony and freedom of expression.⁴⁹

But then the question arises, what was the reason behind the rift between Hindi and Urdu writers? The key to this answer lies in the contemporary socio-political atmosphere of India. The late 1930s and the early 1940s witnessed an intense polarization of Indian society on communal line. With the growth of such poignant environment, the cultural sphere also got adversely affected as Urdu now came to be considered solely as the language of the Muslims. The Hindu separatists urged for the spread of Hindi in lieu of Urdu which in the post Second World War period became so visible with their slogan for 'Hindi-Hindu-Hindustan'. Moreover, the orthodox Muslims also refused to support the progressive movement as it called for a Hindu-Muslim unity and attacked the superstitious religious beliefs of the conservative Mohammedans. However, here we should also mention the controversial role played by Sajjad in the early 1940s. The Communist Party of India gave full support towards the Pakistan demand of the Muslim League. Sajjad, as a party member, also saw this demand for Pakistan as 'the logical expression of the development of political consciousness' among Indian Muslims.⁵⁰ But at the same time, it should also be kept in mind that during the communal riots, they fiercely condemned the policy of Muslim League. They also tried to bridge the gap between the two hostile communities by spreading messages of love through their artistic productions.

By 1937, branches of the association were established in Lahore, Calcutta, Delhi, Lucknow, Kanpur, Amritsar, Sylhet, Guwahati and writers from different linguistic zones started becoming a part of this movement.⁵¹ The movement became extremely popular among the peasants, workers and students. The ruling authority always kept a tight vigilance over the progressive activities as they thought that this organization had close connection with the communists. The Home Secretary of the Government of India, M.G.Hallet issued a circular in 1936, better known as the 'Hallet

Circular'. In this circular, Hallet warned the government that despite their apparently innocent objectives regarding the development of Indian literature towards progressive line, the authority must pay enough heed towards their activities as many of the leaders of this organization had regular connection with some active communists.⁵² Hallet advised the local governmental authorities to watch their suspicious activities cautiously as this organization followed the typical methods which were being followed by the communists of all over world according to the 'policy of the Communist International'.⁵³ Sudhi Pradhan pointed out that the Simla Correspondent of 'The Statesman' was so influenced by the Hallet Circular that it described the entire progressive movement to be 'Moscow-inspired'.⁵⁴ The concern of the government increased as the PWA celebrated the 'Maxim Gorky Day' on 16 August, 1936. Discussions on various issues related to class consciousness of the peasantry and liberation from class exploitation were held on that day in different regions.⁵⁵

There has been a tendency among some of the research scholars to dismiss the literary achievements of PWA by describing it merely as a cultural front of the Communist Party of India. Carlo Coppola argues that the policies of CPI always determined the nature of this movement. Coppola also defines CPI as the 'parent group' of the PWA.⁵⁶ Even, in the late 1930s, this issue generated an ideological rift between Sajjad Zaheer and Ahmed Ali. Ali blamed Sajjad's narrow, orthodox view of 'progress' and condemned him as 'a sycophant of Russia, a sycophant and an apologist of Communist Movement'.⁵⁷

In this context, Ayesha Jalal turns our attention towards the bitter relationship between revolutionary writers of India like Ishmat Chughtai, Saadat Hasan Manto and the PWA as Manto or Chughtai refused to follow any particular ideological approach, in this case- communism. Jalal points out that in 1948, PWA even claimed that 'a non-Marxist could not be a progressive'.⁵⁸ Needless to say that such dogmatic approach, sometimes followed by the progressives, did a massive harm to the cause of the movement. But there are plenty of examples which show that the association did not follow such dogmatic stance always. Munshi Premchand was ideologically a Gandhian. Moreover, Sajjad himself requested to Rabindranath to attend their second Hindi-Urdu progressive writers' conference and the poet was held in high esteem by Sajjad in spite of being a 'non-Marxist'.

Khwaja Ahmad Abbas accepts that the Communist Party of India enhanced its control over the PWA in the 1940s which led to a rigid attitude among the progressives and due to such narrow approach; he was even expelled, though not formally, from the PWA.⁵⁹ However, Abbas in his autobiography mentions that though he was not a party member, in general, the progressive leaders put up with his 'petty bourgeois tendencies'.⁶⁰ It is true that there was a dogmatic tendency cropped up among some of the progressives during this time. But we should also keep it in mind that there were many others who sharply condemned such a narrow vision. Javed Akhtar points out that poets like Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Asrarul Haq Majaz, Kaifi Azmi, Jan Nisan Akhtar, Majrooh Sultanpuri, Sahir Ludhianvi, Makhdoom Moinuddin and several others like them did not adhere to any single political ideology. Rather, their main aim was to raise the consciousness of the people by protesting against all kinds of exploitations. They raised their voice against the imperial aggression and capitalist exploitation and called for a revolution through their writings. Rakhshanda Jalil points out eight revolutionary nazms of Majaz in which he inspired his countrymen to fight against capitalism.

These nazms are- '*Inquilab*', '*Sarmayadari*', '*HamaraJhanda*', '*MazdooronKeGeet*', '*Ahang-e-Nau*', '*Bol Ari O DhartiBol*', '*BideshiMehman Se*' and '*Ahang-e-Junoon*'.⁶¹ In his '*Inquilab*', he hoped for the end of the rule of capitalism and the victory of the workers- '*Khatam Ho Jane Ko Hai Sarmayadari Ka Nizam, Rang Lane Ko Hai Mazdooron Ka Josh-e-Intiqaam*'.⁶² In his poem '*Do Rangi*', Sahir offered a harsh criticism of the inequalities of society due to capitalist exploitation- '*Ye Duniya Do Rangi Hai, EkTaraf Se Resham Ode, EkTaraf Se Nangi Hai*'.⁶³ Sahir in his poem '*Kal Aur Aj*' also talks about the economic exploitation that the peasantry had to face as the the landowners always deprived them of their deserved share of the crops they produced- '*FasleinKatkeMehnatkash, Galley KeDherlagayenge, Jageeronke Malik Aakar Saab Poonji Le Jayenge*'.⁶⁴ Thus, Akhtar concludes that 'to be a progressive one need not to be a communist, but a communist must be a progressive'.⁶⁵

The revised manifesto of the PWA, adopted at the fourth All India conference held in Bombay in May 1943, widened the scope of participation by requesting writers of different genres to join the movement.⁶⁶ As a consequence, authors having different ideological concerns, even some of the religious writers, also joined the movement. Thus, following the line of Talat Ahmed, we may conclude that the PWA was not merely 'a prisoner of the party line'.⁶⁷

Unique Notion Of Progress: The Social Role Of The Progressives

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 was used in a vague way.⁶⁸ This debate led to a further inevitable controversy regarding their role in the society.

Controversy regarding the role of the progressive writers resulted in an ideological rift between Sajjad Zaheer and Ahmed Ali. As a corollary, Ali abandoned the movement after few years. However, Ali's narrow view regarding the basis of progressive literature, his harsh criticism of the writings of Tagore and Iqbal as 'spineless literature'⁶⁹ did not get acceptance in the PWA. Ali talked about two kinds of emotion: the first one produces 'static and lifeless' literature which should be discarded. Moreover, such escapist literature producing artists were condemned as 'opium-eaters'.⁷⁰ The second kind of emotion is dynamic which should be encouraged to produce progressive literature, because such emotion could generate a passion leading to action to fight against the reactionary tendencies.⁷¹

Mahmuduzzafar also argued that the progressive intellectuals should give voice to the struggle of Indian people against reactionary element and for national freedom. But he refuted the ideas of Ali as ultra-radical tendencies of shocking the beliefs of people 'merely for the sake of shocking' would result in the growth of a 'literary terrorism' and this would isolate the progressive literature from the common mass.⁷² Rather, Mahmuduzzafar thought that the duty of the progressive authors was to inject hope for a better life in the minds of the youth and common people. He found two antagonistic forces in society which he termed as 'forces of conservation' and 'forces of change'. The progressives should represent the 'forces of change' through their literary endeavours to combat the other force.⁷³

Ahmed Ali also refused to accept that the progressives should only focus on the peasantry

and working class. Rather, he raised a fundamental question- as they belonged to the middle class, whether they were at all able to hold their pens for the common people. According to Ali, as they had a very vague knowledge regarding the lifestyle of the peasantry or working class, they would never be able to get a clear glimpse of the consciousness of the peasantry or working class.⁷⁴ One of the later progressive writers, Bhisham Sahni, in this context, joins hand with Ahmed Ali. Due to his middle-class background, he considered himself to be ill-equipped to deal with the plight of the deprived people of the society. Hence, Sahni criticizes the 'narrow' progressive view of class struggle.⁷⁵ However, this view had been challenged by another progressive poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz. Faiz argued that personalities like Marx, Lenin never worked in factory, they did not belong to the working class, but it did not prevent them to raise their voices for the emancipation of the labour class. Faiz thought that to compensate their aloofness from the daily life of the working class, the writers had to utilize their 'natural sensitivity', imaginative mind and expressive linguistic skill.⁷⁶

Writers were also encouraged and advised to make a close contact with the lifestyle of the peasantry, working class and common people to get a first-hand knowledge of their everyday struggle. It also enabled them to bridge their gap with the rural population. Writers like K.A. Abbas very often went to villages, tribal areas to study the life of the villagers.⁷⁷ This made them conscious in their struggle against all kind of exploitation, superstition, narrow sectarianism and communalism.⁷⁸ This also proves that a writer does not have to belong to a particular class to write about them as he could also utilize such direct or indirect experiences. In this regard, Abbas points out that one needs not have to murder somebody to portray the character of a murderer.⁷⁹

Talat Ahmed finds a startling 'coincidence of Approaches'⁸⁰ among the progressives and two communist leaders- Antonio Gramsci and Leon Trotsky. Though the progressive leaders did not read their writings, there are certain similarities in their approaches regarding literature and culture. Trotsky maintained that artistic productions should not be treated as a sector altogether segregated from life as such attempt to 'set art free from life' would diminish its cultural values.⁸¹ True art must have a revolutionary aspect inherent in it which aspire a fundamental reconstruction of society.⁸² Trotsky also realized that the Fascist powers tried to destroy the progressive art by terming it as degenerated and wanted to preserve the reactionary element of the society. Thus, it was the need of the hour that the writers should have a profound political awareness which would enable them to flourish their artistic endeavours. On the other hand, political indifference would only strengthen the power of the orthodox exploiters. However, such progressive art should not attain a mere propagandist character as their aim was to achieve 'the independence of art for the revolution' which in turn would assure 'the complete liberation of art'.⁸³

Gramsci, like Trotsky, also put emphasis on the fact that a complete revolution would not be achieved merely by dealing with the politico-economic questions. Rather, it would be essential to gain intellectual power as well because without attaining the intellectual emancipation, the proletarian liberation could not be accomplished.⁸⁴ In order to achieve such revolution Gramsci stressed on the roles played by the intellectuals. In Gramscian sense, everyone is intellectual as having intellect, but not all of them can be treated as 'intellectuals by social function'. Gramsci thus categorized the intellectuals into two groups- 1) the traditional intellectuals, distinguished by their professions, and

2) organic intellectuals who are generally revolutionary in their outlook and they often help to establish a counter-hegemony to bring about and then to consolidate the revolution.⁸⁵

Now, if we consider the activities of the progressives, we would find that they utilized their literature to break down the status quo for the betterment of the common people. They also did not perform the role of mere traditional intellectuals. But, according to Talat Ahmed, they failed to ‘encompass the role of an organic intellectual’ by acting as the direct spokesperson of the common mass.⁸⁶ However, they always tried to produce an intellectual atmosphere in which flourishing of the revolutionary worldview would be attained. They also performed the role of dutiful citizens. For an instance, during the harsh time of Bengal famine, Sahir Ludhianvi, a young poet at that time, wrote his famous poem ‘Bangal’. Moreover, their plays were staged by IPTA in different parts of the country like Bombay, Punjab, Delhi and Andhra and from these they were able to raise nearly 2 lakh Rs. for Bengal Relief.⁸⁷

The progressives also played a key role to bring about peace and harmony during the tumultuous period of communal riot by spreading the message of love and affection through their artistic productions. Krishan Chander’s collection of stories named ‘*Hum Vashi Hain*’, K.A. Abbas’s stories like ‘*Main Kaun Hun*’, ‘*Sardarji*’, poems of Kaifi Azmi, Sahir Ludhianvi, Ali Sardar Jafri and others helped to raise the consciousness of the common people. Sajjad also changed his earlier views regarding the Muslim League and started to criticize League’s aggressive attitude vehemently. In the Urdu organ of the Communist Party of India ‘*Naya Zamana*’, Sajjad reminded that communal riots would result into a civil war at a time when a unite confrontation against the British imperialism should be the primary objective of the countrymen.⁸⁸ Sajjad further maintained that the ‘Direct Action’ plan was adopted by the feudal elite of the League who entered into a ‘secret pact’ with the imperial power against the Indians. This policy of diffusing hatred and anger among the common people would be inimical to the growth of ‘Indian democracy and Indian revolution’ and would only be beneficial to the interests of the elites.⁸⁹

Abbas portrays a clear picture of the contemporary troublesome circumstances of Bombay in his autobiography. In the 1946 days, the entire Bombay was virtually bipolarized according to communal lines. The security of the common people of such sensitive areas like Mahim and Shivaji Park were to be ensured by constructing police check posts. Reciprocal hatred reached such zenith that the Hindus did not dare to enter the Mahim area, while the Muslims were advised not to visit the Shivaji Park region.⁹⁰ In order to rescue Bombay from a bloodbath, the artists of IPTA and the authors of PWA jointly started mobilizing other cultural organizations including the Prithvi Theatre group. Artists of 52 associations took part in a unity procession which covered the entire area from Bori Bunder to Bandra.⁹¹ This procession helped to blur the artificial boundaries of hatred and thus, encouraged the common mass to once again come close to each other despite their religious divergence. During the riot, Bombay was compartmentalized into two sectors- ‘Hindu Bombay’ and ‘Muslim Bombay’. This procession was able to remove such ‘unseen barriers.’⁹² Film stars like Prithviraj Kapoor, Dev Anand, Raj Kapoor, Balraj Sahni, Shammi Kapoor; Urdu progressives such as Sajjad Zaheer, Majrooh Sultanpuri, Ali Sardar Jafri, Kaifi Azmi, Sahir Ludhianvi; Marathi writers like Mama Warerkar, Anant Kanekar and Gujrati authors such as Gulabdas Broker, Jithubhai

Mehta and Ojha were the prominent artists to take part in this procession. They tried to preach the message of peace by their songs, poems and slogans.

Conclusion

Thus, it may be argued that the progressive writers were able to recognize the dangerous impact of the bourgeois intelligentsia over the common mass.⁹³ So they attempted to establish counter-hegemony in society through their artistic activities. Anuradha Roy points out that they knew it very well that culture itself would not be able to lead to a great social revolution but they wanted to assert their control over the cultural sphere in order to generate a necessary psychological background for that revolution.⁹⁴ In the tumultuous 1940s, the progressives refused to confine their activities merely within the arena of art and literature. Rather, during several critical moments like the Bengal famine or the communal riot etc., they performed significant social roles. Sajjad found that in the 1943-1944, many young writers, greatly influenced by the progressive ideology, joined the movement. Young talented poets like Ahmed Nadim Qasim, SahirLudhianvi, Zaheer Kashmiri, Abdullah Malik, Kaifi Azmi, Mumtaz Hussain and others like them were to play significant role in the movement in the near future.⁹⁵ 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.⁹⁶ As a result, many of the young progressive writers like Krishan Chander, SagharNizami, Akhtarul Iman, AsrarulHaqMajaz, Kaifi Azmi, Jan Nisan Akhtar, SahirLudhianvi and MajroohSultanpuri, from 1944, gradually started participating in the film industry and many of them eventually settled in Bombay.⁹⁷ 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 advent of the progressive artists in the film industry, the nature of the movies, their songs, lyrics, screenplays and many other aspects also experienced a qualitative transformation.

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