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From Socialist Realism to a More Radical Poetic Discourse: Indian Context

The aim of this paper is to look at poems in Indian languages to explore how the idea of socialist-realist poetics was received in these languages and how it played a crucial role over time. The Indian poets, inspired by the idea of socialist realism, tried utmost to convert the oppressed peoples' voice into poetic aesthetic. How did they address the conflicting space between the middleclass-centered morale, values, class consciousness and the desire of a working-class revolution? How did they apply a prototyped optimism of the socialist-realist model in the caste-based, religion-tormented Indian reality? Was the socialist-realist poetics insufficient to represent the voice of the oppressed? Did the socialist-realist critics misjudge the poetic aesthetic and the progressive elements? Sometimes the line between mere propaganda/slogan and the poetic aesthetic became blurred and sometimes artificial optimism failed to look at the real reactions of the working class. The point at which this paper would conclude is the transition of poetry from a propagandist tool to a more radical poetic discourse on the Indian reality.

Keywords: Progressive writers, socialist realism, Indian poetry, caste, Poetic diction

Socialist Realism in Indian poetry was closely linked with the Progressive poetry in 1930s. Soviet's idea of 'progress' and their fighting spirit in the World War 2 attracted many Indian intellegensia to embrace the literary philosophy of the Soviet. During the WW2 Bengali progressive writers established a few anti-fascist cultural organisations and in 1942 they formed 'Soviet Suhrid Samity (Frinds Association of the Soviet)'. This Association did not only propagate socialism in the colonised period but tried to build up a literary environment in Bengal inspired by the literary culture of the USSR. The theory and practice of socialist realism gave birth to many constructive debates and Indian poets and critics also got involved into those debates. Andrey Zhdanov was appointed as the secretary of the CPSU central committee in 1946. Joseph Stalin assigned him the task to reassert political authority over ideological, cultural and scientific activity in the Soviet Union (Kelly, 1997). According to the Zhdanovist precept, Socialist Realism requires a positive hero for the narrative who would motivate the working class to join the class struggle to conquer the oppressor class. Such heroes will substantiate the ethical values of socialism in the poetry and fictions (Zhdanov, 1950). With strong morale and optimism they would not fall in any 'regressive' trap set by the ruling class. Its principal protagonist should be a positive hero who challenges the old norms to build up the new one. The hero inspired by the lofty spirit of partisanship defends the interests of the oppressed class and rejects bourgeois and revisionist ideologies. Secondly, the poets should present the realities in straightforward ways without taking resort to the metaphors and 'unreal' imageries. The socialist-realist theory also instructed that the writers would serve in the party as a common worker. Aragon vs. Garaudy debate was initiated regarding this model of socialist realism. Garaudy considered the opinion that no principle of guideline should be imposed from the above in the name of 'socialist realism', which would intervene into the freedom of the author and the party also should restrict itself from interfering into the autonomy of the author because he thought that art is not emerged mechanically. Though Bishnu Dey was fond of Aragon's

poetry, he supported Garaudy's stance and translated his essay 'Artist without trousers'. In Bengal part Nirendranath Roy advocated the theoretical position of Louis Aragon (Dasgupta, 2016, p. 10-11). He argued that the value of art must be decided through the means of ideological struggle, and it is the ideological struggle which leads us to perceive a full knowledge of Marxist aesthetics. The first literary debate within the Bengali Progressive camp (followers of Lunarcharsky vs followers of Zhdanov) centred around the evaluation of contemporary Bengali poetry. Saroj Datta and Prodyot Guha reprimanded the so-called 'decadent' poets like Bishnu Dey, Sudhindra Dutta and Samar Sen mercilessly. But the poets regarded T.S. Eliot as their mentor and claimed that if decadence be the prevailing reality, it would naturally find expression in their verse. According to their poetic judgement, there would be no other alternative. Saroj Datta decided to defend the idea of 'revolutionary poetry' in 1940 and wrote his stinging critical '*Ati Adhunik Bangla Kabita (Hyper modern Bengali Poetry)*' to challenge Samar Sen's text bearing the title *In Defence of the Decadents* published in 'New Indian Literature'. (Dasgupta 2016, 8) Though, Samar Sen was one of the greatest modern Indian poets to experiment with prose-poems to portray the colonised cityscape and the decadent middleclass lives, he was vehemently criticised by the marxist critiques. Bishnu Dey used to believe dialectical materialism as a fully scientific and complete philosophy of life. But at the same time he warned not to take dialectical materialism simply as a system of prophecy. Dey joined several progressive organisations, participated in the political rallies and wrote articles defending marxist aesthetic. But he never forgot that the people of our country have faith in epics and they believe in myths, mythological stories and oratures. He incorporated mythological and epical elements in his poetry and kept balance between the traditional poetic diction and the progressive elements. In a poem named 'Padadhvani (sound of footsteps)' he took an event from Mahabharata and transformed it into a modern one- Heroes of Mahabharata were transformed into the decadent capitalists (Dey, 1955, p. 38-40). Lumpenproletariats defeated the corrupt kings and took control over the elite city to begin a new era. In another poem named 'Moubhog (1946)', written to commemorate a Peasant conference, Dey drew metaphors from popular orature and fairy-tale 'Lalkamal-Neelkamal' to depict the landless peasants' struggle against the tyrant landlords.

Lailkamal keeps vigil before Neelkamal comes
 A sleepless and sharp sword flashing in his hand.
 The rising sun honours him by putting a red tilak on his forehead.
 Whose death warrant has been issued.

(Dey, 1955, 70 Trans. By Anuradha Roy)

But Prodyot Guha, an ardent follower of the Zhdanovist credo, tagged Bishnu Dey as a revisionist and a petit-bourgeois gentleman-poet and he criticised him for not being an active propagandist (Guha 1948, p. 147-48). Bhabani Sen labelled Bishnu Dey as a pseudo-Marxist and said that Bishnu Dey's poetic form and idea of materialism was too vague to represent the real struggle of the working class. (Sen, 1948, p. 95-96) Guha and Sen forgot that the rhyme and rhythm, linguistic felicity and transforming metaphors are the precondition of the marxian poetic aesthetic. Socialist realism is a method of poetic creation and a style of socialist poetry depicting the real world and the world of human feelings, a style differing from bourgeois realism both in the content of the objects which poetry depicts, and in its distinguishing stylistic features. Here I would like to mention a debate about *Nabanna* (1944) which had distinctively started a new genre in theatre, keeping 'People' at the centre. Influenced by the Soviet cultural policy under Andrey Zhdanov and socialist-realist principle, Prakash Ray criticized 'Nabanna (1944)', a play produced by IPTA in the backdrop of Bengal famine, that the farmer in Nabanna died but did not even think to fight. He observed that the play made the audience cry but didn't make them outrageous in anger. It failed to attack the British, the creator of the famine; rather it treated the black marketers, women-traders as villain, who were merely the offshoots of the main crisis. (Ray, 1949, p. 109-140) Bhabani Sen analysed Rabindranath Tagore's poetry

with some dogmatic and rigid understanding of socialist-realism; he labeled Tagore as a reactionary and a pure follower of the bourgeois idealism. (Sen, 1949, p. 134-35) Later Amarendraprasad Mitra (1950) and Amal Hom (1961) refuted Sen's analysis and hailed Tagore for his humanist and liberal poetic philosophy. Some of the talented young poets, who were later appreciated by the marxist critics, used to write in the 'Kavita (Poetry)' magazine, edited by Buddhadeba Bose. Hirankumar Sanyal, an active defender of socialist realism, attacked this magazine for not encouraging the model of socialist realism. (Sanyal, 1945, p. 77) Certainly these examples indicate a problem of the application of socialist-realism i.e, to find a working-class hero with class-consciousness and political correctness in Bengali poetry. Most of the 'progressive' poets came from middleclass background so they didn't have the actual experience of the working class' desire of revolution. Also there was a significant doubt to define 'socialist-realist' literary method and aesthetic in Indian context.

The definition of socialist realism, as stated in a statute of the Association of Soviet Writers, claimed it as the basic method of Soviet literature and literary criticism. According to the doctrine an artist should always focus on a truthful and historically concrete representation of reality. In the first All-Union congress of soviet writers (1934) they made a clear statement, "Moreover, the truthfulness and historical concreteness of the artistic representation of reality must be linked with the task of ideological transformation and education of workers in the spirit of socialism." (Tertz, 1960, p. 24) Socialist realism proclaimed to have its eyes fixed on man with class-consciousness and class-identity. Socialism denotes the genesis of advanced human qualities, the enrichment of intellectual content, the development of versatility, and the end of various conflicts nurtured by the oppressive ruling class. Nicolai Bukharin pointed out correctly that the wording 'communist individualism' employed by Andre Gide was an oxymoron. (Bukharin 1934) Also he distinguished between growth of personality and growth of individualism. Growth of personality in a literary text is important to understand the crisis of the modern world and to understand the conflict between a person's identity and ideological belief. The poetic application of socialist realism doesn't imply anti-lyricism but it intends to be anti-individualistic. The growth of individualism is exactly opposite to the feeling of a collective bond between people and it disunites people. One of the distinguishing stylistic traits of socialist realism is to reflect the poeticized form of this feeling. Subhash Mukhopadhyay adapted this ideology in his poems. He wrote, "We all must have a collective progress/ I don't want to travel alone on aeroplane/ Now let's look at this earth/ finally we will know the ultimate way." (Mukhopadhyay, 2004, p. 16) Subhash Mukhopadhyay, Sri Sri, Bishnu Dey continued to employ the concrete and the individual as their subject-matter. They proceeded to the task of summarizing life in poetry; on the basis of the concrete and individual, they proceed to the portrayal of the universal, richly variegated and dissected whole. Before the publication of the pathbreaking collection of poems 'Mahaprasthanam' and 'Khadgasrishti (creation of the Sword)' Telugu poetry was going through the modern phase which was an amalgamation of romantic poetry and highly aesthetic classic diction. Influenced by the marxist ideology and socialist-realism, Sri Sri broke away from the established poetic tradition.

Mayakovsky was the forerunner and the greatest representatives of Socialist-realist poetry. According to him a poem becomes aesthetic when it serves a revolutionary purpose. He projected the new youth of the first 'proletarian state' as hero who destroyed the old societal ideas and struggled to build the new ones. He celebrated the consciousness to create a new economy, culture and art tempered with the communist ideas. To uphold the morality of the proletariat youth and to declare war against the standards of the bourgeois morality were Mayakovsky's favourite themes. (Mato, Idrizi & kapurani, 2003) In the poems 'The Secret of Youth', 'Our Sunday', etc., he delivered an ardent appeal to the people of new generation to rise up with a revolutionary leap against regressive beliefs and outdated customs:

Forward, forward,
O Communist youth!
Forward, towards the sun.
At the sound
Of your march, Let the heaven tremble with fear.

(Mato, 2003)

Sri Sri's poetry echoed the same but it was deeply rooted into Telugu culture and the reality of the oppressed workers. In 'The Great Forward March' the poet heard the call of a different world and motivates all the exploited souls to march forward to conquer the sea of troubles. He took inspirations from the mythical elements such as Merus and Tretaagni. The rally of the oppressed souls chant 'Harom Harom Hara/ Move forward/ Hara Hara Hara' – Harom Hara hara is the chant to praise Mahadeva, a Hindu deity (Kallury, 2013, p. 22). Most importantly, in the poem this march is presented like a festival for the wretched of the earth and revolution is something to celebrate cheerfully. All their suffering is going to end if they can march together towards a new dawn-

Like the snakes and reptiles
Go forward like a Dhananjaya
Can you not see the dazzle of the
Crown of fire, of the other world
A different world!
The fluttering red flag!
The rising flames of the altars?

(Kallury 2013, 23)

When the reception of the mystic romanticism of Rabindranath Tagore and the poetic philosophy of T.S. Eliot were dominant in Telugu poetry, then Sri Sri introduced Mayakovsky's idea of poetry- the road to socialist realism. A collection of his poems (written during 1940-44) entitled 'Khadgashristi (Creation of the Sword)' was published in 1965 and won the Soviet Land Nehru Award. Indian progressive poets, who got associated with the Progressive Writers' Association, inserted vivid vocabulary and daily-used proverbs into verse same as Mayakovsky and other socialist-realist poets of the Soviet Union did. Mayakovsky inspired Indian poets to create new words and poetic expressions to express profound economic and social change. Poets such as Kaifi Azmi, Sahir Ludhianvi, Arun Mitra identified religious dogmatism as one of the enemies of class-unity and progressive consciousness. They aspired that the working class and the oppressed section might understand and be inspired by the simple but artistic verses of revolution. Their poetry was also an eye-opener for the common mass to identify the selfish actions of the rightist leaders. Kaifi Azmi wrote in his poem,

Yeh guftagu guftagu nahin hai, bigadne banne ka marhala hai
Dhadak raha hai faza ka dil ke zindagi ka ma'amla hai
Yeh tirgi ka hujoom kab tak yeh yas ka izdaham kab tak
Nifaq-o-ghaflat ki aad le ke jiye ga mardum nizam kab tak
Rahen ge Hindi aseer kab tak rahe ga bharat ghulam kab tak
Gale ka tauq aa rahe qadam par kuchh is tarah tilmila ke uthna
(This dialogue is not a dialogue: it is the stage of making or spoiling
The heart of the environment is beating fast for it is the question of life
How long shall remain this enveloping darkness, how long this mammoth sadness
How long shall this wretched system survive taking cover under discord and unconcern
How long shall Indians remain prisoners, how long shall Bharat remain subjugated
Rise with such a force that the chain around your neck falls on your feet).

(Trans. By Raj Bahadur Gour, 2002)

One can find a simple but powerful linguistic register in this Urdu poem where the blasphemous action of the rightist political leaders and the imperialist rulers have been exposed through a worker's voice. The prosody and rhythm of his poems touched the souls of the downtrodden and at the same time brought a drastic qualitative change in the Urdu *Gazal* and *Nazm*.

There were debates within the Progressive camp of Indian poetry on the application of the socialist realism. The major debate centred on the questions about the critical attitude towards the traditional cultural heritage. An urgent need was felt to create a new proletarian culture in conformity with the new proletarian consciousness. Some of the Indian progressive poets found that it would be superficial to copy the soviet-model of making a proletarian hero. Also, another debate was raised about the extent of the party-control on the authors. Despite these debates they all waged war against the traditional rules of prosody and began to experiment new poetic techniques. As the poetic imageries changed through time, the poetic convention also changed in progressive poetry. Poets of 1960s rejected stereotyped poetic diction of the previous age and discovered new poetic convention through the socio-political struggle and by denying individualism and mysticism. It was the time to discard old metaphors, mystic philosophy and old literary thoughts. Bimalchandra Ghosh, a reknowned poet of 1930s Bangla poetry, started his poetic journey by praising nature with lyric poetry. But soon he turned the direction of his poetry against the imperialist policy and the capitalist greed. A reader can sense a prominent change in the language and diction of his poems in the volume 'Towards South' published in 1941. In a poem called 'The Last Will', he imagined God as an aged person who became sympathetic to the distressed lives of the marginal people and he distributed all his property among them. (Ghosh, 1945, p. 47-49) Another eminent poet Dinesh Das changed his poetic content and after his visit to the tea-factories of Northern bengal. He wrote that, "I was drowning in the river of Romanticism but swam successfully towards reality of communist ideology and saved my poetry." (Das 1948). Progressive writers tried to bring a storm in the literary production and pronounced that poetry is merely a juggling with rhythm, romantic words and individuality rather poetry emerges from conflicts of society, words from daily life and toiling struggle of the working class (Ghosh, 2023, p. 143). They didn't compromise with the poetic aesthetic but modified daily-used language and colloquial words into poetic utterance. One of the aims of socialist-realism was to find the voice of the illiterate and marginalised oppressed people. They believed that poetry should not be limited to the elite reader section. Indian progressive poets agreed to this philosophy of poetry with purpose. Modern Indian poetry in 1930s-40s included several new words and turned non-poetic diction into a poetic one. 'Sickle', 'hammer', 'Rally', 'Slogan', 'Strike', 'Bread', 'Bomb', 'Barricade', 'Weapon' were included in the poetic dictionary in that time. They preferred metaphors and similies closely related to class-struggle and new poetic dictions to amplify oppressed people's aspirations. In the poetic convention of that time Moon often used as a metaphor of sickle or burnt bread. As the poetic imageries changed through time, the poetic convention also changed in the progressive poetry. Progressive poets used the colour 'Red' and its various shades infinite times to metaphorize new era, struggle, martyr's glory, revolutionized dawn and so on. Subhash Mukhopadhyay in his poem 'A crimson coloured day' expressed the desire of bringing a new dawn of communism- "observing our gesture, the horses of seven colours are getting ready at the horizon/ you are coming thorough light and I'm struggling with darkness/ but we are ready to bring forth a crimson coloured day" (Mukhopadhyay, 2004, p. 42-43) Self-consciousness of language did exist in the progressive poets' creations. Also, the historical events or the 'substance' had been transformed into subjectivity in their poetry. They understood that the role of poetry is to surpass sloganeering and to outshine the artificial language. In Subhash Mukhopadhyay's observation, a poet doesn't 'possess' the language of poetry; rather, the poetic language is borrowed from the people and, from everyday experience (Dasgupta, 2016, p. 22).

As socialist realism underlined the necessity to transform the experiences of working-class lives into art, another problem arose in case of the Indian progressive poetry. In indian society caste, gender and religion are equally important to understand the struggle of the working class. If a poet does not observe this

multi-layered society minutely or if a poet applies wishful thinking based on his/her own class consciousness, then s/he cannot achieve the poetic aesthetic. Sri Sri, who advocated progressive thought in every sphere of his poetic creation, was strangely silent about the feminist movement which began to take shape during that time (Kallury 2013, 6). Most of the male progressive poets either remained silent on the feminist issues or applied the technique of wishful thinking to portray the lives of the wretched in the poems. Bengali progressive poets were silent about the caste oppression and Dalit consciousness. In the league of the Bengali progressive poets, most of them came from middleclass gentlemen section of the society. In 19th century Savitribai Phule identified the root-cause of sufferings of the Dalit women in her poems. Obviously she wasn't aware of the so called well-defined terms like realism or socialism but she understood the need of education and unity of the working class. It wasn't possible for her to understand a proletarian culture at that time but she did understand that the caste-Hindus, the upper-class rulers, and the patriarchal norms were the enemies of the downtrodden people. She identified these as the main hindrance of the progress. In a poem (1854) she wrote,

Dumb are they
 who plough the land,
 Dumb are the ones
 who cultivate it",
 So says Manu.
 Through religious diktats,
 The Manusmriti to the Brahmin tells,
 "Do not your energy, on agriculture, waste!"
 "Those born as Shudras,
 All these Shudras!,
 Are paying in this life,
 For the sins of their past lives"
 Thus they create
 A society based on inequality,
 This being the inhuman ploy,
 Of these cunning beings.

(Phule 2011, 71 Translator- unknown)

In another poem written in 1860s she gave a zealous call to all the Shudras (oppressed-caste) and the economically exploited class to be educated to get rid of the 'slavery'. It was the task of the believers of the socialist-realist strategy to look for such voice in Indian poetry and to identify the linkage between caste-oppression and class-inequality. But somehow they ignored it or failed to point out.

Telugu poets of 1960s-70s such as Bhairavaiah, Nikhileswar, Gaddar attempted to unite a bridge between the oppressed caste and the exploited class through Revolutionary poetry in Telugu. Gaddar turned poetry-songs into a political weapon and changed the direction of the socialist-realist poetry. In the early 1960s Digambara poets brought a new wind in Telugu poetry by violating every norms set by the society and its established institutions. Their contribution lies in re-linking literature to society. They anticipated the modern social discourses which were to assume the forms of Dalit, feminist, Adivasi and other subaltern movements in the times to come. Gaddar and his fellow poets believed that real art lies with the people and revolutionary artists should learn and hone their talents from and among them. They picked up the art forms of the people and infused them with radical content. In one of his poems Gaddar called Malannas and Madigannas (two oppressed castes of southern India) to stand against all types of oppression including caste, class and gender. He threatened the upper-caste upper-class oppressors with this poetic utterance-

You can bend a slave
 By putting a huge rock on his back
 You can stamp him down.
 His back may be bent
 But his heart will not submit.
 He will keep seeking the right moment
 To straighten his back.
 To set down the stone.

(Gaddar, 2018, p. 46-47)

Namdeo Dhasal appeared in the Indian literary scenario in the early 1970s and raised question about progressive poet's silence on the ongoing atrocities committed on the Dalits of India. Dhasal, a founder member of Dalit Panther in Maharashtra, transformed the Marathi poetic tradition with the language of the oppressed caste and class. He wrote, "Oh, my dear poem/ I don't want to create a separate island/ you continue walking, holding the hand of the commonest of common man." (Dhasal, 2014) Is not this the core idea of socialist-realism? The Dalit Panther (1973) announced all the landless peasants, the working class and the women suffering due to political and economic oppression as Dalits and their comrades. Also they considered all the revolutionary leftist parties fighting against the caste system and caste rules as their friends. (Manifesto 1973, ix) Poets like Gaddar and Namdeo Dhasal did not only re-link the overlooked gap between the caste and class politics but they also challenged the residual 'elitism' present in the leftist literary practice. Progressive writers' purpose was not to propagate mere propagandist literature; rather their commitment to social reality and present reality was different from propagandist literature. Poets like Sri Sri, Subhash Mukhopadhyay, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Sahir Ludhianvi experimented on poetic diction, poetic form and content. And, most importantly, they liberated poetry from the 'possession' of the intellectual elite and *Bhadralok* section. Despite their sincere effort, there was gap to link the caste-oppression and gender-inequality with the class-question. Radical poets of the later decades extended this expression of commitment and liberation in late 1960s. They spearheaded and continued cultural resistance for decades against undemocratic regimes. It's not necessary for the Poetry to celebrate individualism or to be lost deliberately inside the labyrinth of modern decadence. Poetry is not only a sheer smart expression and ornamentation of the middle-class sentiment. In contrast, it can initiate a socio-political resistance, it can open a new cultural front for the oppressed and marginalized and it can be turned into a weapon against the hegemony of the ruling class. The state and its ideological apparatuses have 'successfully' established a depoliticized culture. In Europe or in India extreme right-wing political ideologies are becoming dominant by channelizing such depoliticized culture and by making the working class more vulnerable. The literary followers of the ideological state apparatuses propagate purposefully constructed narratives to sustain such dominance. Marxist poets should realize their responsibility to politicize the readers and to counter-attack the dominant ideology of depoliticization.

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