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Half A Century of Marxist Cultural Movement in India

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IT WAS IN APRIL 1936 THAT THE PROGRESSIVE Writers' Association was formed in Lucknow. The Golden Jubilee of that organisation was celebrated recently under the president ship of one of its founder members, Mulk Raj Anand, in Lucknow from April 9 to 11.

Sudhi Paradhan, the editor of three-volume collection of materials on the *Marxist Cultural Movement in India* deserves the gratitude of all those who are interested in studying the development of India's cultural movement since the 1930s--- a movement which is closely associated with the political, trade union and kisan movements in the country. With patient and painstaking labour, he has brought together all that was available to him of the documents concerning the origin, growth and the problems not only of the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA) but of the Indian People's Theatre Association (PITA) as well. He appends his own foreword or preface to each of the three volumes.

Having been an active participant in this entire period with personal experience of the movement, he has brought all that to bear on his collection of material. Many paid tribute to him when he brought out the first volume in 1979. Striking a personal note, I recall with nostalgia the function organised for releasing that volume in which, in the presence of the late Dr Adhikari, Professor Hiren Mukherjee presented a copy of the volume to me. That function and the study of the material contained in the three volumes bring back to memory the bitter battles in which the founders of the PWA were involved--- first with the avowed opponents of the movement and subsequently among themselves--- on what constitutes the PWA and the IPTA. I

myself had the privilege and the unpleasant duty of participating in this battle of ideas, though it was confined more or less to my home state of Kerala and its cultural movement. The documents collected in the three volumes enable the readers to have as objective a view as possible of the entire development of the Marxist cultural movement in India.

EMERGENCE OF LEFT

It was no accident that the PWA was formed in 1936 and that too in the city of Lucknow. The venue was the Congress Nagar—the temporarily built township constructed for holding the annual session of the Indian National Congress. That session was remarkable for the new turn to the left given to the Congress policy.

The presidential address delivered by Jawaharlal Nehru and the resolutions adopted at the session showed the clear impact of two important events in the development of the left movement in the country— first, the emergence of an organised central leadership for the Communist Party of India which unified all the scattered Communist groups working throughout the country, secondly, the formation of the Congress Socialist Party. The ideas of the left movement propagated by the CPI and the newly—formed CSP were echoed in the presidential address and the resolution adopted at the Congress session.

The same city (Lucknow) was host to another important session—the foundation conference of the All - India Kisan Congress (later renamed Kisan Sabha) whose golden jubilee was also observed in the third week of May this year at Patna.

Among the three gatherings in Lucknow half a century ago, the most important from the national point of view was of course the session of the Indian National Congress, which marked a definite shift to the left. That, however, would not have been effective had it not been for the fact that the other two were also taking place.

The emergence of the Kisan Sabha showed that the mass of Indian peasantry who had fought the British rules first under the dethroned feudal chieftains and then under the bourgeois leaders of the anti-

imperialist movement had begun to search for new allies, while organising themselves independently but as part of the anti-imperialist movement.

The emergence of united action between the re-organised CPI and the newly formed CSP showed that, within the Congress itself, an independent left force with international contacts had started emerging and challenging the authority of the right.

The formation of the PWA (followed subsequently by the IPTA) showed that the new left trend had started asserting itself not only in the political and economic, but in the cultural movement as well.

Mulk Raj Anand, with whose article on the PWA the first volume opens, takes the readers back to “those dark foggy November days of the year 1935 in London when after the disillusionment and disintegration of years of suffering in India and conscious of the destruction of most of our values through the capitalist crisis of 1931, a few of us emerged from the slough of despondency of the cafes and garrets of Bloomsbury and formed the nucleus of the Progressive Writers’ Associations. For, since the historic meeting in the Nanking restaurant in Denmark Street where the original manifesto was read, through the eager, well-attended fortnightly meetings of the London branch where essays, stories and poems were read and lectures delivered (and through less eager, ill attended meetings) through the first All-India Progressive Writers’ Conference held in Lucknow in April 1936, and the opening of branches or committees in the various linguistic zones through the provincial conference and the opening of more branches, our organisation has, today gathered into it or around it, the most significant writers in India and commands membership so large that it forms, quantitatively, one of the largest blocks for the defence of culture in the world.” (PP. 1-2, Vol. 1).

Another founding member of the PWA and its General Secretary for long, Sajaad Zaheer, says in his reminiscences: “Just remember the two years preceding 1935. The political effect of the economic crisis that engulfed the world took in Germany the shape of the dictatorship of Hitler and his Nazi party. In London and Paris, we daily came across the miserable refugees who had escaped or were exiled from Germany. Everywhere one could hear the painful stories of fascist repression.... The painful darkness, which, spreading from

the bright world of arts and learning that was Germany, was throwing its fearful shades on Europe — all these had shattered the inner tranquillity of our hearts and minds. One power could stem the tide of this modern barbarism — the organised power of the factory workers, the power that emerges from the working together, through co-operation, through ceaseless struggle against repression and exploitation of capitalist. The experience of the continuous class struggle creates on this class a revolutionary class consciousness enabling it to frustrate the attempts of capitalism to put the clock back and to become the creators of anew civilisation.” (PP.33-34, Vol. 1)

It was to this new awareness that a definite political form was being given in India by the re-organised leadership of the CPI and the newly formed CSP. It was again this that was echoed in Jawaharlal Nehru’s presidential address and in the resolutions adopted in the Lucknow session of the congress under his guidance. It formed the ideological and programmatic basis also of the newly created organisation of Indian peasantry.

Lucknow in 1936, in short, witnessed the emergence of a new class political force — broad enough to cover all classes and strata in Indian society but under the general guidance and leadership of the international working class headed by the Soviet Union and the Communist International.

The new force, however, was not a mere political movement but all embracing; it did not leave untouched any aspect of the individual or social life of man. Struggle on the cultural front was in other words an inseparable part of the struggle on the economic, the political and the social arena.

CULTURE AND POLITICS ARE INDIVISIBLE

The foundation conference of the PWA had the blessings of such giants of Indian literature as Rabindranath Tagore, Sarojini Naidu and Munshi Prem Chand. Prem Chand in fact presided over the conference of the PWA and said:

“Hitherto we had been content to discuss language and its problems;

the existing critical literature of Urdu and Hindi has dealt with the construction and the structure of the language alone. This was doubtless an important and necessary work and the pioneers of our literature have supplied this preliminary need and performed their task admirably. But language is a means, not an end; a stage, not the journey's end. Its purpose is to mould our thoughts and emotions and to give them the right direction. We have now to concern ourselves with the meaning of things and to find the means of fulfilling the purpose for which the language is constructed. This is the main purpose of this conference." (D. 52)

"Our literary taste", Prem Chand went on, "is undergoing a rapid transformation. It is coming more and more in grips with the realities of life; it interests itself with society or man as a social unit. It is not satisfied now with the singing of frustrated love, or with writing to satisfy only our sense of wonder; it concerns itself with the problems of our life and such themes as have a social value. The literature which does not arouse in us a critical spirit, or satisfy our spiritual needs, which is not 'force-giving' and dynamic, which does not awaken our sense of beauty, which does not make us face the grim realities of life in a spirit of determination, has no use for us today. It cannot even be termed as literature." (P.53)

Recalling that religion had in the past "taken upon itself the task of striving after man's spiritual and moral guidance" and that "it used fear and cajolery, reward and retribution as its chief instruments in this work," Prem Chand pointed out: "Today, however, literature has undertaken a new task, and its instrument is our inherent sense of beauty; it tried to achieve its aim by arousing this sense of beauty in us. The more a writer develops this sense through his observation of nature, the more effective will his writings become. All that is ugly or detestable, all that is inhuman, becomes intolerable to such a writer. He becomes the standard bearer of humanity, of moral uprightness, of nobility. It becomes his duty to help all those who are down-trodden, oppressed and exploited-individuals or groups-and to advocate their cause. And his judge is itself-it is before society that he brings his plant. He knows that the more realistic his story is, the more full of expression and movement his picture, the more intimate his observation of human nature, psychology, the greater the effect he will produce. It is not even enough that from a psychological point of view his characters resembled human beings; we must further be satisfied that they are *real* human beings of bone and flesh. We do not believe in an imaginary man; his acts and his thoughts do not impress us." (pp.53-54)

Munshi Prem Chand's presidential address to the foundation conference of the PWA is a remarkable piece of literary criticism integrating the best in the Indian and world culture, Indian patriotism with international humanism. It showed that Mulk Raj Anand, Sajaad Zaheer and their comrades were not importing into India something that was alien to her culture, but that our own soil was fertile enough to accept and nurture the seeds thrown all over the world by such giants of world literature as Maxim Gorky, Romain Rolland, Henry Barbusse and so on.

Founded as it was under those circumstances, it was natural that the PWA should adopt a Manifesto, which was at once political and cultural. It said:

"Radical changes are taking place in Indian society. The spirit of reaction, however, though moribund and doomed to ultimate decay, is still operative and is making desperate efforts to prolong itself. Indian literature, since the breakdown of classical culture, has had the fatal tendency to escape from the actualities of life. It has tried to find a refuge from reality in baseless spiritualism and ideality. The result is that it has become anaemic in body and mind and had adopted a rigid formalism and a banal and perverse ideology.

"It is the duty of Indian writers to give expression to the changes taking place in Indian life and to assist spirit of progress in the country by introducing scientific rationalism in literature. They should undertake to develop an literary criticism, which will discourage the general reactionary and revisionist tendencies on questions like family, religion, sex, war and society. *They should combat literary trends reflecting communalism, racial antagonism, and exploitation of man by man.* (Emphasis added)

"It is the object of our Association to rescue literature and others arts from the conservative classes in whose hands they have been degenerating so long, to bring arts into the closest touch with the people and to make them the vital organs which will register the actualities of life, as well as lead us to the future we envisage.

"While claiming to be the inheritors of the best tradition of Indian civilisation, we shall criticise, in all its aspects, the sprit of reaction

in our country, and we shall foster through interpretative and creative work (with both Indian and foreign resources) everything that will lead our country to the new life for which it is striving. *We believe that the new literature of India must deal with the basic social backwardness and political subjection. All that drags us down to passivity, inaction and unreason, we reject as reactionary. All that arouses in us the critical spirit, which examines institutions and customs in the light of reason, which helps us to act, to organise our selves, to transform, we accept as progressive.*" (pp.20-21, Vol. 1 Emphasise in the original)

The second conference made certain amendments to the above, which are not of a substantial nature. Among the literary trends to be combated, (in the copy quoted above with emphasis added), the amendment added sexual libertinism. Another amendment was the addition of the aims and objects of the PWA which were as follows:

"The aims and objects of our Association are as follows:

- 1) To establish organisations of writers to correspond to the various linguistic zones of India; to coordinate these organisations by holding conferences and by publishing literature; to establish a close connection between the central and local organisations and to cooperate with those literary organisations whose aims do not conflict with the basic aims of the Association;
- 2) To form branches of the Association in all the important towns of India; (3) to produce and to translate literatures of a progressive nature, to fight cultural reaction, and in this way to further the cause of India's freedom and social regeneration; (4) To protect the interests of progressive authors; (5) To fight for the right of free expression of thought and opinion." (pp. 97-98. Vol.1)

Munshi Prem Chand's presidential address and the Manifesto adopted at the session would make it clear that the founders of the organisation completely disassociated themselves from the theory fashionable in those days that the creative writers or other artists should be above politics. Every sensitive writer and artist was concerned with what happened around him or her. In India, the aspiration for freedom from foreign rule, putting an end to all that is out-moded in the centuries-old Indian society, rapid transformation of India's life and culture along the line of modernisation-all these could

not be separated from the aesthetic tastes and talents of the writers and artists. On a world scale, no sensitive human being (which includes writers and artists) could but be concerned with the threat of fascism and war which was hanging like a Damocle's sword over humanity. That is why, a few week after the PWA was born and the second congress of the International Writers Association was being held in London (from the 19th to 23rd of June 1936), s Manifesto sent by the PWA and signed by Rabindranath Tagore, Sarat Chatterjee, Munshi Prem Chand, PC Ray, Jawaharlal Nehru, Pramatha Choudhury, Ramananda Chatterjee, Nandalal Bose and others declared:

“Today the spectre of a world war haunts the world. Fascist dictatorship has revealed its militant essence by its offer of guns instead of butter and the lust of empire building in place of cultural opportunities. The methods resorted to by Italy for the subjugation of Abyssinia have rudely shocked all those who cherish a faith in reason and civilisation. Rivalry and contradiction among big imperialist powers, deliberate provocation of crude national chauvinistic sentiments, high-speed rearmaments – these are but portents of the critical situation in which we are placed today. On our own and on behalf of our countrymen we take this opportunity in declare with one voice with the people of other countries that we detest war and want to abjure it and that we have no interest in war. We are against the participation of India in any imperialist war for we know that the future of civilisation will be stake in the next war.” (p. vii, Foreword to Volume 1)

Political Differences

The favourable circumstances, national and international, under which the PWA was formed, however, did not last long. The political unity which embraced communists and socialists at one end and the bulk of left Congressmen on the other was broken in three years: the electoral victory of Subhas Chandra Bose in the keenly-contested presidential election of the Congress (1939) turned out to the beginning of the spilt between communists and the socialists, both of them with the Bose followers, the extreme vacillation shown by Nehru and his followers which landed them in the end to become the faithful followers of Mahatma Gandhi, culminating in the bitter battles that were fought between the communists and the rest of the anti-communists after the launching of the Quit India struggle.

This found reflection in the PWA, as was clear from the forward written by the PWA General Secretary, Sajaad Zaheer, to the collection of documents emanating from the 4th All India Conference of the PWA. He said: "As in the political fields, so in literature and art, a 'deadlock' seems to have been reached in our country. The 4th All India Progressive Writers' Conference which met in Bombay in the fourth week of May (1943) attempted to break this 'literary stalemate.'" (p. 1, Vol. 3)

The hope of having broken the 'stalemate' was, however, wishful thinking. The great divide on the political front (between the supporters and opponents of the *Quit India* struggle) continued in the country who had earlier played a role or participated in the foundation of the PWA became bitter enemies of that organisation and everything it stood for. Nor was this surprising. After all, the basis of the unity at the time of the formation of the PWA was political –cum-cultural not merely cultural. When the shift took place in the political situation internationally and nationally, the original unity could not but be disrupted.

Once again, after the end of the war and the new national developments culminating in the 1947 transfer of power from the British to Indian hands, different and conflicting assessments emerged and the artists. Since then, for nearly four decades every turn in the internal or international political situation tended to divided the political activists and thinkers from which no artist writer or other intellectual can dissociate himself or herself. Naturally, therefore, the half-century that has elapsed since the foundation conference of the PWA (barring the first three years) has been a period in which bitter battles were fought among the leaders and activists as much of the cultural as the political movement.

A reference may in this context be made of the subjective desire expressed by many well-meaning activists and sympathisers of the Marxist cultural movement in India that the differences that cropped up among them during the last 50 years should be resolved. Those who give expression to this feeling almost suggest that the PWA formed 50 years ago, and the IPTA nearly a decade later, should be revived and made to function as united and cohesive bodies.

The editor of these three volumes in his Foreword or Preface to separate volume also appears to be inclined to this view. I am referring to the criticism he makes in several places that the ideological-political mistakes of the leadership of the Communist movement in India are at least partially responsible for the decline of the Marxists cultural movement.

Is this view correct? I do not think so. On the other hand, it is in this 50 year-period that there has been an unprecedented upsurge of activity in the cultural field. It goes to the credit of Sudhi Pradhan that he has brought together in the three volumes abundant material showing how, at every state in the history of the movement --- even after it began to “decline and disintegrate” --- the upsurge of creative activity continued. In fact, in the very short period (Quit India struggle) when the Communist Party was fighting with its back to the wall and trying to break out of its isolation among the anti-imperialist masses, it was using literature, drama, folk arts, etc. as the most potent weapons against its political opponents. In terms of output, creative production exceeded, in that period of the Party’s battle for political survival, as compared to what had been done earlier.

The unique contribution of the Marxist cultural movement has been that artistic creation and appreciation is no more confined to the intellectual elite. The growth of the organised working class and peasant movement, together with the movements of other sections of the working people, had awakened the millions to toilers not only to political consciousness but uplifted their aesthetic sensibilities and creative talents. I myself had occasions to refer to this in an article in *New Age* in December 1955 (quoted in vol. 3). Mentioning the worker-peasant artists — dozens and scores of poets, story writers, producers and actors of plays, singers, etc, of Kerala who had risen from the working people and ascribing the phenomenon to the fact that cultural activities have ceased to be confined to a narrow circle of upper class intellectuals, I went on:”

“The credit for such a wide expansion of cultural activities among the working people should undoubtedly go to the trade unions, kisan sabhas and other democratic mass organisations that have rapidly developed in Kerala during the last 25 years. For, it was the awakening of the worker-peasant masses to class consciousness; the militant struggles which they waged for the realisation of their immediate demands and for their long-range objectives; the hope and confidence which were engendered in their hearts that a

glorious future awaited them if only they united their forces with all the democratic and patriotic elements in the country; the sense of strength that developed within them through the struggle which they untidily waged against the common foe-it was these that brought out the hidden talents in the hundreds and thousand of common people which were lying dormant for centuries. In other words, it was the entry of the workers and peasant masses as an independent force into the arena of economic and political struggle that made their entry into the field of cultural activity possible.

“It is however, not only in the field of arts, but in the field of natural and social sciences as well, that the growth of the organised working class and peasant movement has exerted its influence. One of the earliest and most important activities of the trade unions, kisan sabhas and other democratic organisations of the working people was the organisation of night schools, reading rooms and libraries and study classes for the imparting of the principles of political economy and other social sciences, etc., all of which were calculated to stimulate an interest in, and facilitate the study of, serious subjects which were rarely dealt with in Malayalam literature.

“The hunger for knowledge which has thus been aroused among the common people has made it possible for the authors and publishers of workers on such subjects to produce them and get them sold in a comparatively short space of time. This has made a fundamental transformation in the situation in the publishing world of Kerala in the sense that publication which once took as much as four or five years to sell are now sold off in less than a year.” (pp. 482-483, vol. 3)

I have given the above quotation because, though confined to one state, it briefly sums up what happened to the cultural movement all over the country for two decades since the formation of the PWA. Sudhi Pradhan has compiled material from most other states, which tells the same story. One can, therefore, unhesitatingly observe that just as in the economic and political field, the communist, socialist and other leftist movements in the country have uplifted the common man culturally also: he is increasingly becoming the creator as well as the critic of productions in cultural field. Can this be called ‘decline’ or ‘disintegration’ of the Marxist cultural movement in India? Is it not in fact a creditable advance?

It is, of course, true that the organisation that came into being half a century ago, the PWA and its sister organisation, IPTA which came to be formed a little later, do not exist as All -India organisations today. (Even when they were in existence, they were better known in Hindu, Urdu and Benglee speaking regions though other states also had active regional branches.) the fact, however, remains that then as now, there existed and still exist organisations and movements which, though not formally affiliated to the PWA and the IPTA have been working broadly on the lines indicated at the foundation conferences of the two organisations.

I may for example point out that the working people of Kerala produced in this period as many creative and critical works as were produced in other states of India; the bitter controversy that accompanied the setting up of the Kerala unit of the PWA in 1937 and the still more bitter controversies that raged in the 1940s (between the communists and others) were no less intensive in Kerala than anywhere else. These, however, do not get adequate representation in the material brought together in these three volumes-for which of course the main responsibility should be borne by the leaders and activists of the movement in the state itself.

Looking back to the bitter debates that took place in this 50-year period (including those in the 1940s and 1950s), I am convinced that nobody in the Marxist cultural movement has the right to deplore the differences that cropped up among the main champions of the movement. The sharp polemics in which we were engaged, show the virility of what was growing-the new literature and art which was for the people as well as by them.

This of course does not excuse many of us who used much sharper words in debate than we should have, nor even for many of the obviously wrong ideas to which we gave expression in those days. While undoubtedly taking due note of all these deficiencies and weaknesses, however, the Marxist cultural movement is as much a living reality today as its political, economic and other forms of expression.

Where does the Marxist cultural movement stand today? Anybody who has eyes to see will agree that All India organisations of the PWA and the IPTA type are not possible today since there are so many organisations throughout the country, each of them having

their own distinctive identities, though they fall under the category of organisations of progressive writers and artists. The members and activists or every one of them having their own distinctive features, it will be utopian to try to bring them under one organisation with one constitution, one set of rules.

Added to this is the fact that the country is divided into so many linguistic and cultural entities for which nothing more than co-ordination by way of periodical gatherings (with no binding resolutions adopted) is the best that can be attempted. The very diversity of the organisation that has sprung up in this half a century is a tribute to the virility of the movement that was founded in April 1936 in the city of Lucknow. While it did not develop into the huge banyan tree which was the dream of many votaries of the PWA and the OPTA, their roots have struck deep into the soil of India, of every linguistic cultural group that is inhabiting this country. One has to compare the content of the creative and critical works of today with today with their predecessors of half a century ago, compare the two with the materials of the 1936 conference to find the profound impact of the latter on the Indian cultural scene.

The only other point I wish to make here is the relation between the cultural and political movements. As Munshi Prem Chand's presidential address to, and the Manifesto adopted by, the foundation conference of the PWA had made it clear, national and world politics is an integral part of human life and therefore of the arts and literature as well. At the same time, politics is only a part and not the whole life. No writer or artist can be above politics, though as a creative artist and writer he or she may not be subjectively committed to it. Munshi Prem Chand. Rabindranath Tagore and other giants of Indian literature or Gorky, Romain Rolland and so on of world literature could not but be influenced by political developments around them.

However, they are basically creative artists and writers — a fact which, let it be admitted, many of us forgot when we engaged ourselves in controversies. The position was correctly stated by Lenin in a letter he addressed to Maxim Gorky on July 31, 1919.

Merciless in his criticism of one for whom he had the greatest affection and respect, Lenin told Gorky that he was degenerating. "The more I read over your letter", he said, "the more I arrive at the conviction that the letter and your conclusions and all your

impressions are quite sick.” The reason for this, Lenin pointed out, was that Gorki was then living in Petrograd where only one who “is exceptionally well-informed *politically* and has a specially wide political experience can see what is happening in the Soviet Union.” “If you want to observe, you must observe from below where it is possible to *survey* the work of building a new life in a workers’ settlement in the provinces or in the countryside. There one does not have to make a political summing up of extremely complex data, there one need only observe. Instead of this, you have put yourself in the position of a professional editor or translator, etc., a position in which it is impossible to observe the new building of a new life, a position in which all your strength is frittered away on the sick grumbling of a sick intelligentsia.”

Having thus sharply rebuked Gorky for having lost touch with the people who, after all, are the real creators of all that is best in the material and spiritual world which man has created, (as Gorky himself has explained in his writings), Lenin adds: “I don’t want to thrust my advice on you, but I cannot help saying: change your circumstances radically, your environment, your abode, your occupation – otherwise life may disgust you for good.” (*Lenin on Art & Literature*, Progress Publishers, pp. 224-228).

Using the above advice of Lenin to Gorky as our guidance, can it not be said that many of us political activists tried to *thrust our advice* on eminent writers and artists, while many of our critics had taken up cudgels against us because, as political activists our observation of the fighting common people was more at one with reality than theirs? Ideology and politics cannot be either divorced from, or mixed up with, the production and appreciation of works of art and literature—a fact which was forgotten by us, the political activists, or our opponents in the field of the arts and literature.