

A Note from the Editor

The focal theme of this issue of *Summerhill* is the counter-hegemonic cultural role that poetry in India has played throughout the many centuries of its existence. Indian poetry, like Indian philosophy, has a long tradition of creative dissent as it has always been alert to its surroundings and has worked against diverse forms of cultural hegemony. This tradition begins with folk and adivasi poetry where the people speak about their different origins, subvert status-quo myths and raise their voices against the masters who deny them their rights. We also have folk and tribal epics that are parallel to the mainstream epics, at times taking themes from Ramayana and Mahabharata and giving them new, often subaltern, interpretations or celebrating folk heroes.

Sanskrit poetry too had writers who did not necessarily follow the mainstream norms and practices like Yogeshwara or Shoodraka. The Buddhist and Jain poetry as also the Sangam poetry and the Tamil epics *Manimekalai* and *Silappadikaram* interrogated the status quo in various ways. The Bhakti and Sufi poetry (from Tirumular, Basaveshwara, Akka Mahadevi, Andal etc in the South to Kabir, Meerabai, Surdas, Tukaram, Namdev, Chaitanya, Chokhamela, Lal Ded, Bulle Shah, Shah Abdul Latif and several others in the North) often consisted of a critique of the existing religious and social practices including the *varna/jati* system and distinctions on the basis of cult, class and gender. Most of these poets rejected sectarian interpretations of religion, problematized priesthood and questioned the basis of caste hierarchies; many were against rituals and superstitions associated with religion, and most privileged the oral over the written and spoke/ wrote in the languages of the people, instead of Sanskrit, which by that time had become the language of an elite minority, and created new symbolic languages to express their novel perceptions. These movements may be said to have laid the secure foundations of

later poetic practices in India since they interrogated hierarchies, were secular-spiritual and foregrounded the egalitarian ideal.

These ideas had also inspired the anti-colonial and reformist trends that emerged during the freedom struggle as represented by Subramania Bharati, Veereshalingam Pantalu, Rabindranath Tagore, Nazrul Islam, Kumaran Ashan, Vallathol Narayana Menon, Sumitrananan Pant, Maithilisharan Gupta, Subhadra-kumari Chauhan and several others. They squarely criticized the caste system, feudal exploitation, patriarchy and superstition. The Progressive Movement inspired both by Gandhi and Marx, was a continuation of the earlier reformist poetry but with a greater radical zeal and was particularly strong in languages like Urdu, Hindi, Bengali, Kashmiri, Tamil, Telugu and Malayalam and gave rise to several voices that questioned the rising capitalist exploitation along with the old feudal one as also the various kinds of discrimination based on caste, race, class and gender.

The progressive modernists radically changed the idiom of poetry as can be seen in the works of GN Mukthibodh, Ali Sardar Jafri, Dhoomil, Vijaydev Narayan Sahi, Sarveshwar Dayal Saxena, Rajesh Joshi, Kunwar Narain, Kedarnath Singh, Manglesh Dabral, Bishnu Dey, Joy Goswami, Pash, Surjit Pathar, Shiva Reddy, Arun Kolatkar, Dilip Chitre, Attoor Ravivarma, KG Shankara Pillai, Agha Shahid Ali and several others. The emergence of strong feminist, nativist, dalit, adivasi and gay trends in poetry with scores of poets from Amrita Pritam, Kamala Das and Malika Amarshikh to Kanji Patel, Sujata Bhatt and Hoshang Merchant challenging diverse hegemonies, asserting their identity and innovating the poetic language by infusing it with local idioms and slangs- a great example being Namdeo Dhasal-, along with the poetry of the religious minorities and poetry that takes up the issues of environment and peace, has revitalized counter-

cultural tradition in Indian poetry. Many of these are papers presented at a seminar held at IAS last May that tried to look closely at this counter-cultural tradition in its totality as also examine specific trends, authors and texts in an attempt to discover the patterns, paradigms and poetics of the practice of dissent in Indian poetry from the beginning to the present day.

Besides we have a comprehensive essay –originally a lecture- by eminent Indian historian Romila Thapar on the issues related to the theory and practice of

Secularism which is facing a challenge from regressive and theocratic forces today, an insightful paper on intimacy by Sudhir Kakkar , the well-known Indian psycho-analyst, novelist and author, an article on Marathi theatre by the distinguished playwright-novelist Makarand Sathe, an interesting piece on Jean Genet by Shakeel Anjum and the reviews of some important books.

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