

Poetry, Purpose and People: Reflections through Rajesh Joshi's Poetry

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LOOKING THROUGH PAST

The idea of 'poetry for the people' came into existence around 1930, with Progressive Writers Movement (PWM) in India. As India was struggling for its Independence, people from every lingual-cultural community came forward to join this movement of progressive literature. The motive and purpose of this poetical movement was to connect with people at large through poetry and other forms of literature, so that awareness for progressive culture could be created.

Indian National movement had varieties of nationalism- Gandhi, Tagore, Ambedkar and several nationalists had different visions of nationalism. Whereas progressive poetry was inspired by anti-imperialist and socialist worldview and also incorporated Tagore's and Ambedkar's idea of nationalism in later years. In the first half of the twentieth century, colonialism was being condemned and resisted and led to the rise of nationalist struggles in most parts of the colonised world. Tagore's poetry and critical views on nationalism had already started to have a wide impact- despite Gandhi's emergence as the centre of the nationalist movement. Tagore was against the political concept of territorial nationalism and urged for a cultural movement to take cognisance of the diversity embedded in British India. Progressive poetry was inspired by Tagore and began to raise voice against exploitation of oppressed classes and communities identified the idea of nation with masses. If a nation cannot inspire different communities to envision an egalitarian society, it can never stand for her people. With this foregrounding, PWM was beginning to publicize and spread progressive ideas to counter narrow worldview of extant nationalisms. In this backdrop, the tradition of progressive poetry continued post-Independence too and

remained a part of progressive literature. It worked towards formation of a just society by addressing disparities and biases on the basis of class, religion, language, caste, gender or region. In a broad way, progressive poetry attempted to give a voice to the speechless. The entire effort focused on constructing a non-western democratic modern nation-state as an alternative to British imperialist state. India had a challenging task to counter its existing feudal structures, regional-lingual fanaticism and religious-communal fundamentalism.

Breaking established canonical forms of poetry, progressive poetry attempts to reach the masses. With this new content it evolved a new connected language in writing. It countered the notion of art for art sake and depicted untainted and often uncomfortable realities of social life. Progressive poetry also uncovers the misrepresentation of reality by canonical literary structures which are invariably the product of dominant socio-political structures. Thus, the emergence of new discourses in progressive poetry earnestly took up corrective measures and made an effort for constant change and affirmative action. The term 'Progressive' has a wide range of meanings attached to it. It doesn't only question imperialist forces but also colonialism within. To transform these structures of dominance – Gramsci's hegemonies – progressive constantly redefines the notion of progressive thought by giving voice to the subaltern.

Thus, recasting freedom by changing structures of social system has remained a primary poetical goal of progressive poets. Fine poetry, however, can't be reduced to merely a political agenda – though some poets did reduce their poetry to mere sloganeering, and therefore, couldn't establish any literary or artistic goal. Art has its own life

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but it transcends its own era for its expression can remain meaningful for ages, but this can't be done without evolving artistic edge through its form. Form of the poetical structure holds the content of the poetry. This whole process of expression takes place through the vision of the poet and his command over language. Poet's vision does lend a meaningful depth and substance to the expression. But it is the new idiom which any poet invents from the language of his locale that gives expression to poetical structure. The poetical form has the power and capacity to convey meaning of the content in a forceful manner. This art of weaving expression through content and form defines aesthetics of a poetry. It is a poet's gaze which defines and develops aesthetics as a weapon of resistance.

The long progressive movement of poetry started with an ambition for a 'modern' self of a nation which differed from Western-European idea of modernity. Therefore, earlier poets used the term 'progressive' for defining themselves, instead of 'modern'—creating alternative aspirations through literature. They wrote in everyday language and created new idioms, satire and patterns out of it. This language (*zubaan*), Hindustani, gave poetry a new formation. For progressive poets, poetry wasn't just a rhyming scheme of meters and metaphors. Instead, their poetry seeks liberation—through new forms and language of poetic expression. Its free verse signifies freedom in all spheres—be it social, political, economic or individual. It denounces cynicism and decadence that prevails in the Indian society. This new satirical language—the language of literature—became the most powerful medium in providing social critique, establishing diversity and multiplicity of various cultures. Progressive poets strongly believed in tradition and cultures but rejected repressive and obscurantist religious practices.

In the 1980's, when many stalwart poets like Ajneya, Shamsher, Vijayadev Narayan Sahi, Kunwar Narayan, Ashok Vajpayee, Vinod Kumar Shukl, Nagarjun and Trilochan were seen as established, there was a very limited scope for any new poet to make a mark in the existing field. Rajesh Joshi's first collection of poems *Ek Din Bolenge Ped* and his another collection *Do Panktiyon ke Beech Mein* leaves his mark as a different poet amongst readers. For his second anthology of poem she received the famous literary insignia 'Sahitya Akademi Award' in 2002.

Though it wasn't a very favourable phase for Hindi poetry, Rajesh Joshi aspired to make a mark—even as space and readership for poetry reading is drastically shrinking due to widely popularity of prose instead. Rajesh Joshi's passionate and insightful poetry pens some deeper truths with innate simplicity and humour. Breaking myths of reality and moving from one regime of truth to another Rajesh Joshi's poetry sometimes comes as a forewarning.

It makes the readers confront with complexities and frustrations born out of traditional verses, the very project of capitalist modernity. Questioning and pondering over ideological moral-commitments and reluctance for social transformation, his poetry intends to ignite deep introspection. It engages with the cruelties and crisis of imperialist model of modernity.

Poetry doesn't always deliver soothing emotion to comfort the restless mind. This conscious shift in the subject of literary writing has been a deliberate change. This poetry emerges out of a deep unrest and continuation of corrupt colonial bureaucratic structure. Progressive poets like Rajesh Joshi suggest the urgent need for reassessment of the current dispensation and take corrective measures. Though poetry in itself doesn't provide answers to problems generated by a corrupt system, but it jolts and forces us to rethink about the existing structures of power and exploitation and, subsequent use of communal disharmony and rigid notions of one's religion to create rift amongst people. This relegated significant questions of economic inequalities. But progressive poets have continued to pen what comes as a reality check to look beyond existing theories and political practices. Rajesh Joshi belongs to this generation of poets who see through his time even as he still continues to write. Through his poetry one can understand various phases of resistance and protest. His poetry connects us with various forms of marginalities and forces the reader to come out of comforting routinized life.

Translating some of Rajesh Joshi's very popular poems would be an attempt to understand the creative mission of his poetry. In the age of information revolution, this may redefine ways of reading and thinking. It may, perhaps, also enable readers to see through widening individual spaces of a society fragmented by loneliness, anxiety and depression. A crying need for social and economic change, his poetry is relevant to those who believe in the process of affirmative action. Standing up for humanitarianism may sound a bit rhetoric, but the world still faces catastrophes and devastation of wars.

I have chosen four most popular poems of Rajesh Joshi. The first poem 'Etcetera' (*Ityadi*) reflects upon such sections of society—common people, middle class, downtrodden, intellectuals—who can be situated along various categories of the 'margins' of existing power structures. His second poem is titled 'Meerut '87'. This poem is situated around the communal riots of Meerut in 1987. The poem reveals fear, agony and deep anxiety of people experiencing violence. Common people traveling in a train symbolises the nation struggling with provocative assertions of fundamentalism and fanaticism. The third poem 'Will be killed' (*Mare Jayenge*) looks beyond the formal institutions of democracy and unmasks the corrupt regimes of the

powerful. Those who are not compliant or amenable to this system are perennially vulnerable. His last poem 'Those children who are going for work!' is seeking equal rights and shun exploitation of children who constitute

one of the most marginalised sections of underdeveloped industrialised nations. All these poems evoke an intense hope for the future.

इत्यादि

कुछ लोगों के नामों का उल्लेख किया गया था
जिनके औहदे थे
बाकी सब इत्यादि थे

इत्यादि तादाद में हमेशा ही ज़्यादा होते थे
इत्यादि भाव-ताव करके सब्जी खरीदते थे और खाना-वाना
खाकर
खास लोगों के भाषण सुनने जाते थे
इत्यादि हर गोश्टी में उपस्थिति बढ़ाते थे
इत्यादि जुलूस में जाते थे तख्तियाँ उठाते थे नारे लगाते थे
इत्यादि लम्बी लाइनों में लगकर मतदान करते थे
उन्हें लगातार ऐसा भ्रम दिया गया था कि वे ही
इस लोकतंत्र में सरकार बनाते हैं
इत्यादि हमेशा ही आंदोलनों में शामिल होते थे
इसलिए कभी-कभी पुलिस की गोली से मार दिए जाते थे

जब वे पुलिस की गोली से मार दिए जाते थे
तब उनके वो नाम भी हमें बतलाए जाते थे
जो स्कूल में भर्ती करवाते समय रखे गए थे
या जिससे उनमें से कुछ पगार पाते थे
कुछ तो ऐसी घटना में भी इत्यादि ही रह जाते थे

इत्यादि यूँ तो हर जोखिम से डरते थे
लेकिन कभी-कभी वो डरना छोड़ देते थे
तो बाकी सब उनसे डरने लगते थे
इत्यादि ही करने को वो सारे काम करते थे

Et cetera (*Ityadi*)

Names of only few persons were mentioned
Those who had designations;
All others were et cetera

These et ceteras always outnumbered
These et ceteras always bargained to buy vegetables
And after eating their meals
They listen to the speeches of influential persons
Et cetera's attendance added weight to every conference
Et cetera went to processions, held placards, did sloganeering
Et cetera stood in long queues to exercise their right to vote
They were always told that
Only they elected governments in this democracy
Et cetera always joined movements
Therefore, sometimes got killed when police fired

When they get killed by the bullets police fired
Such names were also told to us
That were registered when admitted to school
Or to get salary in that name
Despite all these tragedies, etcetera they remain

Et cetera otherwise were scared of every risk
But sometimes when they stopped getting scared
Then everyone else felt scared
Et cetera nonetheless did all such work

जिनसे देश और दुनिया चलती थी
 हालाँकि उन्हें ऐसा लगता था वो ये सारे काम
 सिर्फ अपना परिवार चलाने को करते हैं
 इत्यादि हर जगह शामिल थे पर उनके नाम कहीं भी
 शामिल नहीं हो पाते थे
 इत्यादि बस कुछ सिरफिरे कवियों की कविता में
 अक्सर दिख जाते थे। (1999)

That ran the affairs of the world
 Although they always felt that they did all this work
 Only to run their families
 Et cetera were present everywhere but their names
 Were never ever included
 However, et ceteras were often noticed
 In the poems of some eccentric poets

मेरठ '87

जब-जब किसी स्टेशन पर रुकती है रेलगाड़ी
 खिड़कियों से झरती हैं आवाज़ें और
 कौंधती हैं बत्तियाँ
 खिड़की से दूर बैठा बूढ़ा पूछता है
 खिड़की के पास बैठे लड़के से
 "कौन-सा स्टेशन है भैया?"

खिड़की से बाहर झाँकता है लड़का
 पढ़ता है स्टेशन का बोर्ड
 कहता है—
 मेरठ।

हर स्टेशन पर पूछता है बूढ़ा
 "कौन-सा स्टेशन है भैया?"
 हर स्टेशन पर बाहर झाँकता है लड़का
 पढ़ता है बोर्ड और कहता है
 मेरठ।

मेरठ!
 मेरठ!
 मेरठ!
 पीली बत्तियों वाली बोगी में
 ठसाठस भरे लोग बुदबुदाते हैं
 मेरठ से कब बाहर निकलेगी
 यह रेलगाड़ी?
 (1987)

Meerut '87

At the railway station whenever any train stops
 Voices poured out of the windows and
 Glint fulminated
 An old man asks sitting far from the window
 A boy sitting close to the window
 "Brother! Which station is this?"

Outside the window a boy peeks
 Reads a board at the station
 He says —
 Meerut

On every station an old man asks
 "Which station is this brother?"
 On every station a boy peeks outside
 Reads a board and says
 Meerut.

Meerut!
 Meerut!
 Meerut!
 In the bogie of yellow lights
 People stuffed inside it burbling
 When will it get out of Meerut
 This Train?

मारे जाएंगे

जो इस पागलपन में शामिल नहीं होंगे,
मारे जाएंगे

कठघरे में खड़े कर दिये जाएंगे
जो विरोध में बोलेंगे
जो सच-सच बोलेंगे, मारे जाएंगे

बर्दाश्त नहीं किया जाएगा कि किसी की कमीज हो
उनकी कमीज से ज्यादा सफ़ेद
कमीज पर जिनके दाग नहीं होंगे, मारे जाएंगे

धकेल दिये जाएंगे कला की दुनिया से बाहर
जो चारण नहीं होंगे
जो गुण नहीं गाएंगे, मारे जाएंगे

धर्म की ध्वजा उठाने जो नहीं जाएंगे जुलूस में
गोलियां भून डालेंगी उन्हें, काफिर करार दिये जाएंगे

सबसे बड़ा अपराध है इस समय निहत्थे और निरपराध होना
जो अपराधी नहीं होंगे, मारे जाएंगे
(1988)

Will be killed (*Maare Jayenge*)

Those who will not join this insanity
Will be killed

Will be forced to stand in the witness box,
those who will speak in protest
Those who will speak unfiltered truth, will be killed

Will not be tolerated if anyone's shirt
Is found whiter than 'Their' shirt
Shirt of those not found stained; will be killed

Will be pushed out of the world of art, those who are not
ballad mongers
Those who will not sing their virtues, will be killed

Raising flag of religion those who will not march in a
procession
Bullets are going to storm them, will be proclaimed
nonconformist (Kafir)

The worst crime at this time is
Not to be a criminal and to be unarmed
Those who are not criminals
Will be killed.

बच्चे काम पर जा रहे हैं

कोहरे से ढँकी सड़क पर बच्चे काम पर जा रहे हैं
सुबह सुबह
बच्चे काम पर जा रहे हैं

हमारे समय की सबसे भयानक पंक्ति है यह
भयानक है इसे विवरण की तरह लिखा जाना
लिखा जाना चाहिए इसे सवाल की तरह
काम पर क्यों जा रहे हैं बच्चे?

क्या अंतरिक्ष में गिर गई हैं सारी गेंदें
क्या दीमकों ने खा लिया हैं
सारी रंग बिरंगी किताबों को
क्या काले पहाड़ के नीचे दब गए हैं सारे खिलौने
क्या किसी भूकंप में ढह गई हैं
सारे मदरसों की इमारतें

क्या सारे मैदान, सारे बगीचे और घरों के आँगन
खत्म हो गए हैं एकाएक

तो फिर बचा ही क्या है इस दुनिया में?
कितना भयानक होता अगर ऐसा होता
भयानक है लेकिन इससे भी ज्यादा यह
कि हैं सारी चीजें हस्बमामूल

पर दुनिया की हज़ारों सड़कों से गुजरते हुए
बच्चे, बहुत छोटे छोटे बच्चे
काम पर जा रहे हैं।
(1990)

Those children who are going for work!

On the road enveloped in fog; children are going for work
Early morning children are going for work
This is the most dreadful line of our times

It is dreadful to write its description
It should have been written as a question
Why children are going for work?

Have all the balls been dropped in the space
Have the termites eaten
All those colourful books
Have all the toys been crushed under the black mountain
Has any earthquake devastated
All the buildings of Mosque

Have all the playgrounds, all the gardens and courtyards of homes
Have been extinct one by one

Then what is left in this world?
How dreadful it would have been if it would have been like this
Dreadful it is but more than that it is
That all the things are a 'habit of a glance'.¹

But passing through a thousand roads of the world
Children, very little innocent children
Are going for work.

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NOTE

1. The poet has used a word *Hasbmamool*, the actual word in Urdu
is *Hasb-a-mamool (Nazarkiaadat)*.