

EMERGENCE OF PROGRESSIVE WRITING IN INDIA: FROM *ANGARE* TO THE BIRTH OF THE ALL INDIA PROGRESSIVE WRITERS' ASSOCIATION

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Angare, a collection of short stories, was published in 1932. Edited by Sajjad Zaheer, with contributions from young writers like Ahmed Ali, Mahmuduzzafar and Rashid Jahan, the book raised a tremendous furore in India. Sajjad Zaheer was the guiding factor behind the publication and he himself contributed five stories. The conservative Indian intelligentsia called it loud and obscene and unacceptable to refined literary tastes. And soon after its publication the book was banned by the British. Now the question is: Why did a small collection of nine short stories and a one act play, written by young and virtually unknown writers, create such a tremendous impact on the rich literary tradition in India, instead of fading into oblivion for being improper and objectionable?

The reaction can be explained if the general attitude of the writers is taken into account. These writers, residing in England for higher education, generally belonged to the educated upper class Indian families. They had been influenced by Western thoughts, ideas and literature from their very childhood. Later on, their education in Europe and the contemporary European literature gave them an exposure that altered their literary tastes once and for all. They began to envision a classless society that would be free from imperialist domination on the one hand, and socio-religious oppression on the other. Like contemporary progressive European writers, they too felt that literature had a role in influencing the society, one that could be used to emancipate the downtrodden from different levels of exploitation. In this way, they wanted to communicate with their readers on a level that had never been imagined before. Hence their description of society was very different from that made by their established Indian counterparts. The writers who contributed to *Angare*, wanted to write down stories of real people: they wanted their characters to be real, those who would combat real situations in a very realistic manner. These writers, consciously and deliberately, wanted to jerk the readers into the realisation that literature was not just romantic and pedantic portrayals of elite

thought and life. Literature could also depict the lives of common men and women. The idea was to make a different statement altogether—to expose social injustice at various levels in various forms and in a genuine and convincing way. *Angare* exposed details of life that were earlier left unspoken.

Garmiyon ki ek Raat (Sajjad Zaheer) is a conscious and deliberate depiction of the injustice that was being faced by Jumman, the peon, as he related his perils to Munshi Barkat Ali. Munshi Barkat Ali's reaction as apparent to the readers is one of extreme irritation at Jumman. However, there is perhaps a feeling of guilt too for not helping the peon. This is evident from the uneasiness on his part, one that runs throughout the story. On the one hand there is the urge of the middle class Munshiji to live a better life, while on the other there is the poor peon trying to scratch out a living amidst exploitation and struggle. This contrast forms the basis of the story and is evident throughout the story.

Dulari (Sajjad Zaheer) is a narrative on a very common problem where an orphan servant girl was sexually exploited by Kazim, the son of the household and then abandoned when he got married. Dulari fled, became a prostitute, and was brought back home by an aged servant who spotted her. However Dulari could not stay and she disappeared again. The story exposes clearly the feudal mind set of the members of the household as the story is told. It is only at the end that Dulari's feelings are given due consideration. This transforms the story of the household into the story of Dulari, the servant girl.

Jannat ki Basharat (Sajjad Zaheer) is about an ageing Maulavi, Mohammad Daud-sahib, who holds himself in high esteem as he delivers his religious duties with fervour and zeal, so much so, that the duties physically tire him out. It is on the pretext of this religious dignity, that he refuses physical intimacy with his young second wife. On the other hand however, he dreams of engaging with naked *houris* in heaven, and is awakened by his wife's laughter who mocks him as he wakes up clutching the holy- book to his chest. This story is a satire on the so called dutiful practice of religion. It brings into question the role of human intellect, reasoning, wisdom and imagination in the practice of religion. It made a very strong statement, unheard of in earlier literature, and was obviously bound to shock the so called elite.

Neend Nahin Aati (Sajjad Zahir) is about the life of Akbar, a poor poet (shair). An assortment of jumbled thoughts rushes through his mind as he stays awake at night. These thoughts not only picture his problems, but contrast them with the existing society and even the moderate nature of nationalist politics.

Phir ye Hungama (Sajjad Zahir) narrates a series of events, each of which question the role of the almighty in the preservation of life. These incidents indirectly criticise the imperialists, the feudal set up, the agony of the poor and the role of faith in all this.

Dilli ka Sair (Rashid Jahan) is a very short story that relates the experiences of Mallika begum, who was forced to wait at the station as her husband had left her stranded there in search of something to eat. She sits on top of the luggage and observes the people around her, often reacting, without being observed herself as she is clad in a burqa. As she relates her experiences to her friends, she even mentions feeling uncomfortable in the burqa and the men roaming about openly expressing curiosity about her.

Jawanmardi (Mahmuduzzafar) is about an estranged relationship between a husband and his ailing wife until it becomes important for the man to establish proof of his virility. It results in the death of his ailing wife during childbirth.

Badal Nahin Aate (Ahmed Ali) is yet another narrative about how the women are exploited and abused. The plight of Muslim women is the main focus here. *Mahavatton ki ek Raat* (Ahmed Ali) vividly portrays the struggle of a woman and her children on a cold winter night. It relates how the woman tries to accept the reality of the changed circumstances of her life.

The play, *Parde ke Peechhe* (Rashid Jahan) shows how the life of a woman is entirely under the control of men, the control often justified by social and religious norms. The helpless woman, although well to do, has no choice but to give birth to children on a regular and continuous basis. She hates it, yet there is no way in which she can put an end to the agonising process. These are certain facts, very common to the contemporary society, but no one had frowned upon them before, nor questioned them or even brought them into discussion.

Whereas *Dulari*, *Jawanmardi*, *Dilli ka Sai rand Parde ke Peechhe* highlight the oppressive nature of patriarchal households, *Mahavaton ki ek Raat* is about the silent struggle of a woman to keep herself and her children afloat amidst dire circumstances. *Angare* evoked thought provoking emotions and forced the readers to think beyond literature and beyond linguistic structures and cultural barriers that had been so important and so dominating in earlier literature. They created unwanted ripples in the existing Indian literary circles and raised the ire of established Indian conservative writers, who perhaps began to sense the danger of the evolution of a new literary style, already in vogue in Europe, and one that had the potential to replace the existing trend of Indian literature. The British on the other hand, sensitive of anything related to communism, however farfetched it could be, stoked these flames of indignation among the Indian educated elite. Always prompt in their attempt to curb communism, an enemy of their imperialist ideology, they banned the sale of *Angare*¹. Nevertheless, socialist ideas of art and literature had already made inroads among the modern Indian educated classes, a fact that led to the evolution of Indian literature on a new basis in the years to come.

Four months after its publication, *Angare* was proscribed, but it became the formal declaration of the beginning of a new genre in Indian literature, that of progressivism, one that was soon to take over. It was this controversy that led to the moulding of the idea of forming the Progressive Writers Association or the PWA. Despite the fact that *Angare* was a criticism regarding the existing style of writing, representing in fact, a denunciation of everything that it said, the writers refused to apologise on its accord. Five months after its publication, on 5th April, 1933, the authors issued a statement from Delhi. It was drafted by Mahmuduzzafar and published in *The Leader* (Allahabad) on the same date, entitled *In Defence of Angare: Shall We Submit to Gagging?* It said in clear terms:

“...Shall we submit to such gagging? That is the question I wish to raise here. Coming to the contents of the book itself, the stories of my friend S. Sajjad Zaheer are concerned chiefly with the criticism and a satire of the current Moslem conceptions, life and practices. His attack is directed primarily against the intolerable theological burden that is imposed from childhood upon the

average Moslem in this country-a burden that leads to a contortion and a cramping of the inquisitive or speculative mind and the vital vigours of body of both man and woman. Ahmed Ali essays into the realms of poverty, material, spiritual and physical, especially the poverty of the Moslem woman, and imagination and admirable boldness breaks through the veils of convention to expose the stark reality. Rashid Jehan, who is also a Doctor of Medicine drawing on her practical experience, also portrays vividly the ghastly plight of the woman behind the purdah. My own single contribution is an attack on the vanity of man which seeks to find an outlet at the expense of the weak and defenceless womanhood. Nobody can deny the truthfulness of those portraits, and any one who chooses to exert himself can see that he is not drawn for the sake of literary 'flair', but spring from an inner indignation against 'this sorry scheme of things.' The authors of this book do not wish to make any apology for it. They leave it to float or sink of itself. They are not afraid of the consequences of having launched it. They only wish to defend 'the right of launching it and all other vessels like it' ... they stand for the right of free criticism and free expression in all matters of the highest importance to the human race in general and the Indian people in particular....Our practical proposal is the formation immediately of a League of Progressive Authors, which should bring forth similar collections from time to time, both in English and the various vernaculars of our country. We appeal to all those who are interested in this idea to get in touch with us. They may communicate to S Ahmed 'Ali, M. A., Jalal Manzil, Kucha Pandit, Delhi."

BACKGROUND TO THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE PWA

Social realism had surfaced in European literature towards the end of the 19th century. Literature of this genre aimed to make a realistic portrayal of the society at large. It outlined human experience, delved deeply into human psyche and human relationships, and in general, portrayed a realistic picture of society at large. However, such literature almost always left the issue of emancipation of the masses at bay, or was directed at reconciliation between the exploiters and the exploited. Nonetheless, social realism preceded the emergence of purposeful literature.

Socialist realism, a new genre in literature, emerged in Europe, and especially Soviet Russia, in the early twentieth century. This new trend had a socialist base and defined literature as something that is not just realistic in form and content, but that which had a purpose to fulfil. It generally catered to the existing reality and was directed towards a goal—the establishment of socialism and the consequent emancipation of the masses.

It was in the Soviet Writers Congress of 1934 that it was made clear that the purpose of literature was not merely to engage readers for whiling away time or being entertained in the process. The purpose of literature was much more profound and that this new category of literature would, while expressing the realities of life, touch upon the emotions of the common masses. This literature would be able to influence the masses and make them aware about the socio-political world around them: a world whose very foundations were tainted by the exploitation of the masses, one that could, in no way, serve their interests and hence needed to be radically transformed. It was also about the duty of the author as an instrument which generates through writing, this awareness among the people, one that would eventually bring about this transformation³. It was felt that the prevailing imperialist philosophy that justified its claims for having established a world congenial for the masses despite the wars and despite the consequent woes that went with it, had to be shunned once and for all. There was the realisation, the necessity to portray a dimension previously unexplored in literature, the life of the masses; one that could sensitise the world about the need for a revolution, and one that held promises for ushering in a better world. This new world that would be built would have socialism as its mainstay, where the interests of the masses would dominate. The new genre of socialist realist writers would participate in this political struggle, their role as harbingers of a new literature, a literature with a purpose.

Endless debates ensued as to how literature and art could bring about a difference in the world situation; how peace, prosperity and happiness could be restored to one and all; how the bourgeois influence on literature could be replaced by new realistic literature that would be relevant to the lives of common men and women and lead them towards the goal of socialist realisation⁴. Gorky said in his speech that the common men and women needed to be trained in

writing so that they could write their own stories in perhaps the most realistic manner than ever before⁵. Karl Radek reiterated these thoughts and explained them further⁶. Doubts were raised regarding several facts regarding whether literary forms would be compromised; whether there would be a resultant loss of spontaneity; whether natural lucidity in literature would give way to forced jargon and pedantic theorising; whether a new generation of writers would suddenly emerge from amongst the so called common masses, one that would produce works that would stir the masses into realisation of their socialist goals; whether they would actually be capable of doing so—were among other points that were raised on the issue. Concerns were huge, reaction enormous⁷. Yet, the foray of socialist realism into the realm of literature could not be denied. It made its presence felt in Europe and shook the very basis of existing literary forms. So strong was its appeal that its influence spread across the globe and India was no exception.

Soon after the Soviet Writers' Congress, the First International Congress of Writers for the Defence of Culture was held in Paris from June 21st to June 25th, 1935. Romain Rolland and Henri Barbusse organised the Congress and it clearly advocated a strong bonding with the peoples' front as had been propagated by the Soviet Writers' Congress. The whole event was held under the patronage of Maxim Gorky, and the invited guests included Louis Aragon, André Gide, Aldous Huxley, André Malraux, Robert Musil and Boris Pasternak, among others. There were émigré German authors like Anna Seghers, Heinrich Mann, Lion Feuchtwanger, Robert Musil, Bertolt Brecht and others. Sajjad Zaheer and Mulk Raj Anand from India too attended the Congress.

Andre Gide delivered the inaugural address, where he upheld need for socialist realist literature. He underlined the need for writing "literature of protest" against the socio-economic structure that was promoted under fascist regimes. The main points of discussion were the relation of the work of artists and writers with the contemporary socio-political issues. Among the subjects discussed were cultural heritage, nation and culture, and the role of author in society. The contemporary socio-political scenario as related to the rise of fascism was an issue

that was taken up very seriously in the Congress. It discussed how fascism was a threat to the independent expression of authors, and how it was to be thwarted. The Congress gave the exiled German writers a platform to fight against both fascism and anti-Semitism. To them, the idea of liberalism still meant invoking the principles of the French Revolution. It is no wonder therefore that they actually expressed their views in their Memorandum the *Defense of the "Ideas of 1789"*. Debates as usual, were numerous, of which the controversy between the surrealist André Breton and the USSR delegate Ilya Ehrenburg is particularly well known. However, this Congress was not limited to the role of the writers regarding the ushering in of socialism, it was also about freedom of expression as posed against threats from fascism and other authoritarian regimes⁸.

CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL SITUATION IN INDIA

In order to analyse the earliest influences of progressive writing on Indian intelligentsia, it becomes necessary to evaluate the contemporary historical background. It was the year 1935. India was in the throes of the independence movement. The Congress led movement was had spread throughout the length and breadth of the subcontinent. Yet, it had not quite silenced the discontent that had arisen about its moderate policies. Communism that had been more or less crushed by the British through the Meerut Conspiracy Case was once again trying to reorganize. Even within the Congress there had emerged a socialist strand of thought that was increasingly influencing young impressionable minds.

The main agenda of the Lucknow Congress of 1936 was the rejection of the Government of India Act of 1935. Jawaharlal Nehru's presidential address had a deep leftist tenor, one that undoubtedly made things rather uncomfortable for Gandhi and his followers. He said clearly that the Indian problem was not an isolated one and that it formed an integral part of the world situation, one that needed to be analysed before coming into any conclusion about the plight of the Indians under the British:

“..our struggle was but part of a far wider struggle for freedom, and the forces that moved us were moving millions of people all over the world and driving them into action...”⁹.

Nehru believed that “the only key to the solution of the world’s problems and of India’s problems lies in socialism” and it was also the only way to put an end to the poverty, unemployment and imperialist control over India. He also felt that the Congress should support and facilitate the formation of workers’ and peasants’ unions in India. Socialism as represented by the U.S.S.R, was the only hope of the future. He said quite categorically:

“...I work for Indian independence because the nationalist in me cannot tolerate alien domination; I work for it even more because for me it is the inevitable step to social and economic change. I should like the Congress to become a socialist organisation and to join hands with the other forces in the world who are working for the new civilisation. But I realise that the majority in the Congress, as it is constituted to-day, may not be prepared to go thus far...”¹⁰

Nehru’s speech at the Faizpur session of the Congress was in the same tenor. He blamed the British policy of appeasement for the rise of Nazism in Germany. Here too, like that at the Lucknow session, Nehru clearly reiterated that the answer to India’s problems lay in socialism, without which a mere freedom from foreign rule might be achieved; a fact, that would not solve the more pressing problems of poverty and exploitation of the masses.

Meanwhile the Congress Socialist Party (CSP), a socialist faction within the Indian National Congress, was formed in 1934 with Jayprakash Narayan as its general secretary and Minoo Masani as its joint secretary. The constitution of the CSP defined that the members of CSP were the members of the Provisional Congress Socialist Parties and that they were all required to be members of the Indian National Congress. The CSP wanted its members to fight from within the Congress and under no circumstances did it allow otherwise.

Satyabrata Rai Chowdhuri says, “...Although the Congress socialists accepted the fact that the Congress represented the mainstream of the nationalist movement, they also contended that

the influence of the reactionary forces over its leadership had rendered it incapable of leading a revolutionary struggle against British imperialism and its native allies..."¹¹ Members of communal organizations or political organisations, whose goals were incompatible with the ones of CSP, were barred from membership. It rejected the theories of Gandhi, which it found irrational. At the same time it criticised the sectarian attitude that the communists had about the Congress. Influenced by Fabianism as well as Marxism Leninism, the members of the Congress Socialist Party or the CSP, advocated a decentralised, socialist and secular state.

Around 1933-34, there was a revival of communism especially after the withdrawal of the Civil Disobedience movement. By 1936 the communists had joined the CSP as an answer to the popular front strategy of the Comintern. Bipan Chandra has said, "...The period was so favourable to socialist ideas, and they spread so widely and rapidly that it appeared that the Left was on the verge of ideologically transforming the Congress and the nationalist movement in a socialist direction..."¹² The Congress socialists began to increasingly collaborate with the communists and the "...results were increasing working class enthusiasm and militancy around 1937-38..."¹³

Jayaprakash Narayan presented a Programme of the All India Congress Socialist Party in its Third Annual Conference in 1937 whose objectives were to create a nation that was based totally on socialist principles¹⁴. It also said:

"The formation of peasants' and workers' unions and active support to the struggle conducted by them should be kept in the forefront of this programme..... The Anti-imperialist struggle cannot be separated from the day-to-day struggle of the masses. The development of the latter is the basis for a successful fight against imperialism therefore, one foremost task outside the Congress is to develop independent organizations of the peasants and workers and other exploited sections of the people.... Besides these class organizations we should also attempt to organize the youth of the country so as to mobilize the most active elements of the lower middle class..."¹⁵.

The Congress Socialists, with the support of the communists, were instrumental in the establishment of the All India Kisan Sabha in 1936. It should be mentioned here that Kisan

Sabhas (peasant committees) had already been formed on a local basis in Bihar, South India and other parts of the country. They were all united under the banner of the All India Kisan Sabha that was set up under the aegis of the Congress on April 11th, 1936. Swami Sahajanand Saraswati, of the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha fame, was made its first president. The decision of the Comintern to follow the 'united-front' policy helped in the collaboration of the Communists with the CSP activists in pursuing the goal of spreading mass movement in India. Despite opposition from the right wing leaders of the Congress, the All India Congress Committee, under the leadership of Nehru, resolved to provide support to the peoples' movements that had generated in India. It was at this juncture that the All India Progressive Writers Association was formed.

THE BIRTH OF THE PROGRESSIVE WRITERS ASSOCIATION

The PWA was formed in London in 1935 by Indian writers and intellectuals, with the encouragement and support of some British literary figures. It was in the Nanking Restaurant in central London that a group of writers, including Mulk Raj Anand, Sajjad Zaheer and Jyotirmaya Ghosh drafted a manifesto which stated their aims and objectives. The Association initially comprised university students from Oxford and Cambridge, who met once or twice a month in London to discuss and criticise articles and stories. In 1935, Zaheer left for India and thus the idea of forming an All India Progressive Writers Association or the AIPWA began to take shape. Always conscious about the growth of communism, especially after its proliferation in India prior to the Meerut arrests, the British intelligence was aware of this new trend. It "...placed the movement under close scrutiny from the very beginning, despite being a literary association and never being proscribed in pre-independent India..."¹⁶

E.M.S. Namboodripad said, "It was no accident that the PWA was formed in 1936 and that too in the city of Lucknow."¹⁷ He was of the opinion that the leftist thoughts that had made a profound impact on politics and economy were beginning to get reflected in the cultural sphere as well. The IPWA and soon afterwards, the IPTA, are examples in this regard. He felt that the writers too had a role to play in the development of nationalism.

It can also be mentioned here that political leaders were also interested in the proliferation of the progressive writers' movement, many of them being prolific writers themselves. They too had been influenced by the idea that the writers too had a duty to perform in the struggle for freedom and in the emancipation of the masses. However, it would be a mistake to say that all writers who joined the PWA led movement were communists. Sajjad Zaheer has said in one of his interviews, "...Now these people did not become communists and then join the CSP, as in my case, for example. They were Congressmen, who became Congress Socialists and then later on became communists...."¹⁸

Sajjad Zaheer was of the opinion that this helped in giving shape and consolidating the movement in India.

"I had also started working in the Congress, the Congress Socialist Party and the Communist Party. At this time, I was quite close to Pandit Nehru and I talked to him also about this and he also liked the idea. Acharya Narendra Deva, Jayaprakash Narayan and Rambriksha Benipuri of Bihar also liked it. So, naturally we started expanding, as it were, from Allahabad. At Calcutta, there was my friend Hiren Mukerjee to whom I sent the manifesto and he took it to other Bengali writers. Rabindranath Tagore was also approached; similarly Sarojini Naidu was approached; so was Maulana Hasart Mohani and in that way we contacted even some of our greatest writers as well as younger writers, who were, more or less, patriotic minded and who believed in this kind of literature. That is to say, that literature must serve the cause of the people and the biggest cause at that time was the liberation struggle of the Indian people. So we got general sympathy and support from our political leaders, I mean, the Congress leaders like Panditji, Mrs. Naidu and Maulana Azad. These were the three people who, one can say, took interest in matters of culture and literature. Then the Congress Socialist leaders, I must say with emphasis, took a deep interest in it, particularly, Jayaprakash Narayan, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Asoka Mehta and Achyut Patwardhan"¹⁹.

The political turmoil brought about by the nationalist movement against the imperial masters had also shaken the socio-cultural life in the sub continent. In such a situation, the progressive writers felt awakened to a new situation. Congress leadership did not impress them and they often"... viewed them with contempt..."²⁰ They felt that they too had a role to play in the

development of nationalism and the crushing of exploitation in the country. They understood, through western socialist movements and socialist-communist literature, making rounds in the cultural and political circles of the West, that exploitation did not end with the end of imperialism. It was much more deep rooted than was ever imagined, and that an idyllic world would emerge only with the end of exploitation and appropriation of the toiling masses. They thus began to write realistic literature thinking that the more realistic the story is, the more full of expression and movement in the picture, the more intimate the observation of human nature and psyche, the greater will its influence be on its readers. Human beings with raw and real emotions make human characters real and thus touch the deeper sensitivities of the readers.²¹ This was the duty that the progressive writers had to perform in order to bring about the society that they envisaged. However, their programme was not one that was limited merely to a recording of suffering. It was to supposed to arouse the “critical spirit” inherent in the readers. It said that all that managed to stimulate this critical spirit was to be accepted as “progressive”²².

Shabana Mahmud says, “The idea of forming a League of Progressive Authors was announced for the first time in this statement. It could be said that the publication of *Angare* had, as early as 1932, laid the foundation for the establishment of the Progressive Writers' Association. Consequently, they established the Progressive Writers' Association in London in 1934, and then took the initiative to set up the All India Progressive Writers' Association in India in 1936.”²³

The British were indeed exceedingly vigilant about the proliferation of communist ideology across the world and more so in the colonies that they held in domination²⁴. However, it would be erroneous to label the Indian progressive movement as a mere component of “socialist construction” of culture. Nor was it imposed from above. Like the emergence of communism in India, the progressive movement too originated under the influence of both international and national political situation. On the one hand, there was the influence of the Bolshevik ideology of spreading culture among the masses so as to create a new generation of writers and artists who would depict the dreary and difficult world inhabited by the common masses, and then

take up the narrative to another level that would hail the ushering in of a new and better world for one and all. On the other hand, there was the advent of fascism, its exploitative, repressive and violent manifestation condemned at large; and the rise of anti-colonial movements in Asia, Africa and Latin America, on the other. Besides, there was also the influence of the socio-religious reform movements, especially those that dealt with the emancipation of women, the denunciation of the caste system and so on. All these factors found expression in the works the early progressive writers. Aijaz Ahmad has said that just as the “poetry of medieval theisms” spread across “diverse languages, regions and social strata”, so also did the progressive movement in its modern context. He further says that the Indian progressive movement was “...something of an analogue of the national movement itself, intersecting with it and providing something of a national cement in the artistic and cultural arena, as the national movement did in the political arena – but intersecting with the progressive side of the national movement while staying clear of its regressive and conservative side. And, like the national movement, it too served as our link to the rest of the world...”²⁵ There are indeed different shades of progressive literature both at the international level and in India. They are realistic portrayals of society often advocating without reconciliation the complex social hierarchies that determine the lives of the common masses. They may or may not be totally in terms of the guidelines set at the Soviet Writers’ Congress, yet they are, in their own ways, a conscious, convincing and deliberate depiction of social contradictions. Aijaz Ahmad is of the opinion that “The relationship between the communist and the non-communist components of progressive thought, even within what we can recognisably call Marxism, has always been very difficult to pinpoint”²⁶.

Sajjad Zaheer was perhaps the driving force behind the formation of the Indian Progressive Writers’ Association. From the publication of *Angare* in 1932 to the organization of the first Conference of the All India Progressive Writers’ Association (AIPWA) in Lucknow in 1936, he was the person who had always been in charge. His evolution to communism in the 1930’s was the result of the changing world atmosphere coupled with the stifling political situation in India. This attraction towards communist principles was not exceptional, for several intellectuals of the time had either momentarily or permanently shown such tendencies as it had appeared as

the only plausible solution. It can also be mentioned here that several political leaders were also interested in the proliferation of the progressive writers' movement, many of them being prolific writers themselves. They too had been influenced by the idea that the writers had a duty to perform in the struggle for freedom and in the emancipation of the masses. And this idea to awaken a "critical spirit" among the readers became the goal of the writers for a long time to come. Munshi Premchand's iconic presidential address at the first conference of the All India Progressive Writers' Association bears true testimony to this spirit when he said, "...literature can best be defined as a criticism of life....The literature which does not arouse in us a critical spirit, or satisfy our spiritual and intellectual needs, 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...It becomes his (writer's) duty to help all those who are downtrodden, oppressed and exploited—and to advocate their cause and his judge is society itself—it is before society that he brings his plaint. 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, human psychology, the greater effect he will produce..."²⁷

¹ The book was banned by the Government of the United Provinces on 15 March 1933, under section 295A of the Indian Penal Code, which reads, "Whoever, with deliberate and malicious intention of outraging the religious feelings of any class of His Majesty's subjects, by words, either spoken or written, or by visible representations insults or attempts to insult the religion or the religious beliefs of that class, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to two years, or with fine, or with both."

(See United Provinces Gazette, 1933 IOR V/I 1/51 I and Proscription Notice: Publications Proscribed During the Quarter Ending 31 March, 1933 IOR L/R/7/75).

² See *The Leader*, Allahabad, 5th April, 1933.

³ Andrei Zhdanov (Secretary of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party), well versed in contemporary cultural trends, made the opening speech at the First Soviet Writers Congress with great vigour and eloquence. He declared that the success of Soviet literature was a result of the success of socialist construction. Soviet literature, he felt, had brought about a metamorphosis in literature 'by smashing every kind of obscurantism, every kind of mysticism, priesthood and superstition' (and by bringing about in its place, a literature that not only propagated equal rights for the toiling masses but also for women—a fact, so long left untouched by the literary world. See ³ A. Zhdanov, *Soviet Literature—the Richest in Ideas, the Most Advanced Literature Soviet Writers Congress 1934, the Debate on Socialist Realism and Modernism*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1977, p.18. Hereafter referred to as *Soviet Writers Congress 1934*.

⁴ Gorky felt that realism as expressed in the portrayal of the existing is not enough. The idea of reality should be completed “by the logic of hypothesis” by supplementing it with the “possible” and the “desired” image. Only then would it “provoke a revolutionary attitude to reality, an attitude that changes the world in a practical way” See Gorky’s speech, *Soviet Writers Congress 1934*, p.44.

⁵ The training of “beginners” who were later to assume the responsibility of promoting a literature for the toiling classes, one that would expose their socio-economic significance on the one hand, and reveal the revolutionary role to be played by them in their own emancipation on the other, was a very vital point raised by Gorky. See Gorky’s speech, *Soviet Writers Congress 1934*, p.68. However, the questions regarding how this training was to take place, or what its subject matter was to be, or other details regarding it, remained unanswered.

⁶ Radek felt that just as the noted proponents of earlier literature lacked “contact with the masses”, so also the young proletarian literature “suffers from an insufficiency of culture”. Hence they needed to be educated in terms of literary style, form and expression. This was possible only through the systematic study of earlier literature, “without losing their contact with the masses, without withdrawing for a single moment from the struggle of the masses, without turning into spectators, onlookers of this struggle...” See Karl Radek’s speech, *Soviet Writers Congress 1934*, p.146.

⁷ Doubts were expressed by the French writer Malraux, regarding the fact that such supervision might smother the originality of talented writers. Radek laid the French writer, Malraux’s apprehensions at rest by saying that this “solicitude for literature” would not in any way “smother” the literary urges of a new born Shakespeare. He said: “I think that the apprehensions of our friend Malraux as to whether a new-born Shakespeare might not be smothered in the crèches of our country evidence a lack of confidence in those who mind the children in these crèches. Let this Shakespeare be born—I am convinced that he will be born—and we will lose no time in bringing him out into this world. Even those who are not born Shakespeares we do our best to bring out into the world and give them all assistance.” Ibid. p.148.

⁸ Differences between the surrealists and the socialist realist writers had been there for sometime. It surfaced again in the Paris Congress of 1935 where the surrealist authors and artists were, in various cases, deliberately stopped from voicing their opinions.

⁹ Jawaharlal Nehru, Presidential Address to the Indian National Congress, Lucknow, 1936, Cited in *The Labour Monthly*, Vol. 18, May 1936, No. 5, pp. 282-305.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Satyabrata Rai Chowdhuri, *Leftism in India 1917-1947*, New Delhi, 2011, p.155.

¹² Bipan Chandra, *Indian National Movement: the Long term Dynamics*, New Delhi, 2010. pp.118

¹³ Sekhar Bandopadhyay, *From Plassey to Partition*, New Delhi, 2007, p.380.

¹⁴ Jayaprakash Narayan, *Programme*, All India Congress Socialist Party, Third Annual Conference, 1937, p.7-8, Congress Socialist Party Documents, Archives, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi.

¹⁵ Ibid. p.24-25.

¹⁶ Talat Ahmed, *Literature and Politics in the Age of Nationalism: the Progressive Episode of South Asia, 1932-56*, Routledge, New Delhi, 2009, p.32.

¹⁷ E.M.S. Namboodripad, *Half a Century of Marxist Cultural Movement in India*, in Sudhi Pradhan ed. *Marxist Cultural Movement in India*, Calcutta, 1985, p.1-2.

¹⁸ Sajjad Zaheer, Oral History Project interview with Shree Sajjad Zaheer, Interviewer: Dr. Haridev Sharma, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, December 4th 1969.

¹⁹ Oral history interview with Shree Sajjad Zaheer, Interviewer: Dr. Haridev Sharma, New Delhi, Dec. 4th 1969, Oral History Transcripts, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, p. 98.

²⁰ Talat Ahmed, *Literature and Politics in the Age of Nationalism: The Progressive episode in South Asia, 1932-56*, New Delhi, 2009, p.66.

²¹ Sudhi Pradhan, op.cit. pp. 53-54

²² Ammended Manifesto, Adopted in 1938, ibid. Volume 1, p.21.

²³ Shabana Mahmud, *Angare and the Founding of the Progressive Writers’ Association*, Modern Asian Studies, Volume 30, No. 2, May 1996, p.451.

²⁴ The political situation in India was quite volatile. There was discontentment among nationalist leaders about the moderate Congress policies. Besides, the Communist movement was once again trying to reorganise after it was badly crushed through the Meerut Conspiracy Case. There was the emergence of a socialist faction in Congress leadership that eventually led to the consequent formation of the Congress Socialist Party in 1934. The All India Kisan Sabha was established in 1936 with the support of communists and Congress Socialists.

²⁵ Aijaz Ahmad, *The Progressive Movement in Its International Setting*, *Social Scientist*, Vol. 39, No. 11/12 (November–December 2011), p. 29.

²⁶ *ibid.* p. 31.

²⁷ Munshi Premchand, *The Nature and Purpose of Literature, Presidential Address of MUNSHI PREM CHAND delivered to the First All- India Progressive Writers Congress, held at Lucknow, on April 10, 1936. (Translation from HINDUSTANI)*, Sudhi Pradhan, *Marxist Cultural Movement in India, Chronicles and Documents 1936-1947*, National Book Agency, Kolkata, 1979, pp.52-54.