

POETICS OF *PYAASA* AND NARRATIVES OF NATIONAL DISILLUSIONMENT

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After having a successful ‘tryst with destiny’, India emerged in 1947 from the dark alleys of colonisation and as an independent republic in 1950 with the stated aim of social justice and equality. The long struggle for independence had at last drawn to a close and had ushered in a new age: the age of hope, an age in which the leaders would liberate the downtrodden masses from the old, feudal social structures and create a new modern India, a society in which all would be free and equal. “There was a diffused sense of buoyancy and promise” in India in the 1950s; modernity, material gains, rationalist and scientific outlook were the most important goals for this ‘new India’.¹

Era of hope and the popular culture

In spite of all the euphoria surrounding the emergence of India as a free nation, what needs to be remembered is that the transition from colonial to post-colonial times was not a smooth process. With tragic memories of partition the nation needed hope and major attempts at fulfilling the promises which the leaders had made during the freedom struggle. While the newly independent state took numerous political and economic policy decisions to attain the goals of social justice and equality, e.g., Five Year Plans, the Industrial Policy Resolutions, some land reforms, these were felt to be inadequate. There was a need of bringing this hope, this air of ‘nation building’ in the minds of the public, and one of the ways it was devised was with the help of popular culture, through cinema and literature. According to the Film Enquiry Committee Report (1949), Indian cinema was supposed to serve as an “effective instrument” for “national culture, education and healthy entertainment” to promote and further induce “a national character with its multifaceted aspects”.²

Various film makers and poets were also producing narratives of hope, idealism, and achievement. Poets such as Ramdhari Singh ‘Dinkar’ showed faith in the power of the common masses in democracy and wrote:

*Sadiyon ki thandi-bujhi raakh sugbuga utthi, Mitti sone ka taj pahen
ithlati hai;
Do raah, samay ke rath ka gharghar-naad suno, Sinhasan khali karo
ki janta aati hai.*³

Mehboob Khan's film *Mother India* (1957) became the brand ambassador of the Nehruvian model of economic growth and development. Thus, the newly free nation was creating a metanarrative of achievement, hope, innocence, and idealism; much needed factors in nation building. No doubt, there were ample controversial issues, conflicts, and challenges in this decade,⁴ but the leaders, the middle class, intellectuals and the artists did not wish to highlight them so soon.

Amidst this euphoric discourse of hope and achievement, one poet stood out and questioned the eulogistic praises showered upon the Indian republic. The poet could clearly see how in this newly free democracy was only a political arrangement. Ideas of wealth and material progress dominated the social and cultural lives of the people, a schizophrenic attitude – modernity in the public life and orthodoxies and rituals in the private domain – was rampantly spreading all across society life. The poet deconstructed the myth of national pride and presented a significantly strong counter-narrative, a cultural critique of the postcolonial nation-building process, which largely marginalized the poet, the rebel and various such voices which could not contribute to the material and scientific advancement of the nation.

The aim of this paper is to historically analyse some of the lyrics of Sahir Ludhianvi for Guru Dutt directed movie *Pyasa* (1957) which voiced the agonies and despair of a poet isolated and alienated in a (Platonic) republic.⁵ The poems emphasise post-colonial disillusionment with ideals of freedom, unity, happiness, self-rule and the Gandhian dream of wiping the tear from every eye.

Cultural Materialism and Existentialism

Ananda K. Coomaraswamy has argued that a nation cannot be formed without a cultural base. K.N. Panikkar quotes Coomaraswamy by stating that nations are “made of artists and poets, not by traders and politicians”.⁶ The early Marxist approach had viewed culture essentially as a super-structure emanating from and influenced by the economic base. In this contest Panikkar quotes Lukacs who had advanced the view that “the different aspects of the social structure can and must become independent of each other”.⁷ It is this desire to break away from the influence of the base that is seen in the poetic of *Pyasa*. Sahir's critique of crass materialism can be seen and analysed in this light. Sahir, as a poet and lyricist of *Pyasa*, takes a Marxist critique of the social structure with a strong tinge of existentialism.

In order to comprehend the critique of the materialist social system made by *Pyasa* and its poetry, it is imperative that we understand and

analyse the workings of labour in a capitalistic mode of production with special reference to the definition of and types of labour. Marx takes the help of Adam Smith, the doyen of *laissez faire* capitalist economy, to understand the differentiation between what Smith calls 'productive' and 'unproductive labour'. This differentiation as per Malthus "remains the basis of all bourgeois political economy".⁸ In Smith's definition, 'productive' labour is the labour which is directly exchanged with 'capital'. This is so because this type of labour is contributing to the increase in the value of the product as well as the profits. As opposed to this, 'unproductive' labour is exchanged with 'revenue', i.e., wage or profit. To quote Marx, "A writer is a productive labour not in so far as he produces ideas, but in so far as he enriches the publishers who publish his works, or if he is a wage-labourer for a capitalist".⁹ In this context an established poet with a large following is a productive labour in *Pyaasa*. The poet works for an entrepreneur i.e., Mr Ghosh,¹⁰ who is a publisher. On the other hand, unproductive labourer as he is a freelancer not working for any publisher or churning out lines that the society wants to read. His poetic narrative is countering the social tide by the propositions of critiquing the materialist life and raising existentialist questions, and hence is not desired by publishers.

The poetry of disillusionment is not seem profitable by the bourgeois, and hence is neglected even in popular cinematic culture. This can be seen in Sahir Ludhianvi's interview to *Filmfare* magazine in which he says that the producers and makers of film gave more importance to the form of the songs and poetry than to its content. The change was initiated, as per Sahir, by Guru Dutt in *Pyaasa*.¹² It indicates that good, meaningful poetry, poetry calling for radical social change or poetry of social disillusionment is not seen till *Pyaasa* in Hindi cinema as it was thought not sufficiently popular for fetching money and profits. An example can be seen in the movie when Vijay is thrown out of a *mushaira* as he reads out a 'sad', 'dejected', poem which did not correspond to bourgeois tastes. This reiterates the point of how culture was becoming subservient to the economic base.

The realism that was being promoted by the political establishment was nothing short of creating a sense of false consciousness by attempting to gloss over the disparities, rivalries, and the general despicable situation of the masses. This 'myth of the rising nation' a nation of egalitarianism, of happiness was deconstructed step by step by the poetics of *Pyaasa* wherein Sahir starts with the critique of a materialist society, going on to existential woes, and finally to alienation and rejection of the social world.

Poetical narrative of national disillusionment in *Pyasa*

It is imperative to understand that the poems/ songs were written for the screen, and hence the language used is Hindustani and not chaste Urdu. Also, the poems/ songs have a sequence that follows the cinematic narrative, thus we shall be following that sequence. This shall help as there is a steady build-up of emotions in Sahir's poetry passing through multiple levels of critical outlook towards the social structures, constructing 'structure of feelings'.¹³

The first poem, "*Ye Hanste Hue Phool, Ye Mehka Hua Gulshan*", recited by the poet in an amusing landscape, gives us the first glimpse of his isolation in the grand narrative of progress and happiness in the nation. The poet derives all his metaphors from the landscape, a biblical Garden of Eden, smiling flowers, scented garden, roads bathed in colour and light, happy bees around the flowers! The garden reflects the nation and the bees represent the people. But the poet realizes and confess he has nothing to offer to this beautiful garden, but few tears and sighs. The poet's confession of his inability to contribute to this success story is actually the nation's inability to accommodate artists, poets and sensitive minds in the nation-building process. The poet is unable to place himself within this euphoria and excitement of freedom and independence. The poem effectively brings out the truth that emotions are displaced or marginalized because they are incapable of contributing to the nation's growth and development. Also the existentialist dilemma could be seen to have begun in the poet's mind when he asks this rhetorical question and offers his own answer — 'what can I offer except few tears and sighs'. He is sure that no one has any interest in his sentiments in this Garden of Eden already 'fruitful and well-watered'. There is no place for his temptations in this metanarrative of hope, achievement and innocence. Thus, the poem clearly introduces us to the changes in the postcolonial Indian society. The poet had become a professional person whose relations with the society came to be dominated by the demands of the market which demanded a glossy picture of the nation, where tears and sighs are absent and everyone is happy. And if the poet cannot provide such a narrative, he has no place in the market. Nietzsche had noted, "The value of a human being does not lie in his usefulness: for it would continue to exist even if there were nobody to whom he could be useful."¹⁴ Similarly, the poet remains useful, even when all he or she can offer is tears and sighs, but it is the nation which doesn't find him 'useful' to a materialistic mode of growth.

The next song, "*Tang Aa Chuke Hain Kashmakashe Zindagi Se Hum*", carries the existentialist question forward. It narrates that every person, especially the poet, is a product of the social environment and

shall narrate what he sees around, and not what the others want to hear. He accepts defeat at the hands of the crumbling social relations, and breaks every bond with hope. He also indicates his willingness to reject the entire social order because of his harrowed experiences in life. This is a symbolic gesture on the part of the poet to reject the world in the time that was publicly declared as the 'era of hope'. This hopelessness, melancholy and complaint get extended in the third song the poet sings at his beloved's place.¹⁵ Born out of insult, rejection, apathy and nostalgia our poet experiences at the elite gathering, this poem, in first glance, may seem to be a lover's complaint to his beloved. But a deeper textual analysis will suggest it is the complaint of hundreds and thousands out there who had strong faith in the promises their leaders had made on the midnight of freedom in the 'tyrst with destiny' speech. And how, within a decade, all those hopes and aspirations proved to be broken and shattered. All that the people, outside power and position, received was despair, disillusionment, disempowerment and abandonment of their wishes by the state.

"*Jinhein Naaz Hai Hind Par Wo Kahaan Hai!*" is a direct satire on the Indian middle class who did romanticize India's past; Nehru himself used to claim there is "enough of nobility and greatness about her".¹⁶ According to Darius Cooper, "Dutt chose tragedy as his new instrument through which he decided to dissect the nation's rot. The ones violating the rules had to be exposed; what was wrong with the rules had to be stated and restated and the awful truth revealed to the audience. They had to be made aware of where they were going."¹⁷ Sahir had already written this poem as *Chakle* (brothels). Raj Khosla has told Munni Kabir, when Sahir sang the original *Chakle* song to Guru Dutt, he told Khosla, "Raj, this is it! This is Pyaasa."¹⁸ This poem evokes the metaphor of the prostitute to present a critique of the times. In an emotionally charged sequence, the poet bemoans the state of independent India by showing the degradation it has brought upon its women. The song evokes monetary transactions, the frivolousness of courtesan dances, and the spectre of disease. Referring to the imagery, Alison Griffith has commented that "as an allegory of social morality, the prostitution narrative articulates discourses of the nation on a visceral level, representing human pain and suffering in both the song lyrics and visual imagery".¹⁹

The final break with the degrading materialist world is seen in the last poem, which is also one of its finest. Sahir in "*Ye Mahlon, Ye Takhton, Ye Taajo Ki Duniya*",²⁰ is a scathing critique on the excessive materialisation of social structures, and hence the social life. It critiques the existence of human life by comparing it to a toy, to be made and played as per the wishes of the society and how the uniqueness of

every individual, the liveliness of social interactions, the independent thought processes have all been systematically suppressed to a level that the humans in the materialist world are nothing but the living dead. Every social relation, even that of love, friendship, commitment have been commercialised and have lost all the sentimentality that it once possessed. Our poet questions what use shall be even if he achieves everything in this world because at the end he is going, to use the Marxist terminology, to be alienated. Our poet speaks of the alienation from all forms of social relations of production that have become an integral part of the structure. However, unlike the Marxist theory, which does provide for an optimistic alternative to the bourgeois society, our poet wants to end this world by burning it down but does not provide for an alternate vision. Therein lays the open ended-ness of the argument, that every individual has the right to conceive and create a world of his/her dreams. Sahir leaves the conflict unresolved because not every argument, not every conflict has a ready-made, perfect solution that can be fit to the societal needs.

Conclusion

A poet cannot be totally disconnected his times, nor can someone force him to make a choice between being a poet or a sociologist or a historical critic of his times. It is his choice and he does go through a process where his personal and social experiences make him both, a poet and a critic of his times. When the society undergoes widespread political, social, and economic change, the idea of art, artiste and their responsibility in such transforming times change too. If Iqbal's "*Sare Jahan se Achcha Hindostaan Hamaara*" was the need of the hour in the 1930s; Sahir's "*Jinhein Naaz Hai Hind Par Wo Kahaan Hai!*" was also a fitting response to the moral and ethical bankruptcy in India in 1957. Such songs record the barely perceptible changes in people's daily life experiences which often go unnoticed in the pursuit of recording grand and manifest history. To write a holistic history and do justice with the discipline, a historian cannot neglect such culturally rich critics of their times. To quote Jyotika Virdi, "Expanding the archive source and the historiographical method to include popular film texts [and songs studied here] could well become an extension of the subaltern history project."²¹

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Copper, Darius, "The Mapping of Guru Dutt's Comedic Vision", in Lal, Vinay, and Ashish Nandy (eds.), *Fingerprinting Popular Culture: The Mythic and the Iconic in Indian Cinema*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2006, p.158.

2. As mentioned in Schulze, Brigitte, "The Cinematic 'Discovery of India': Mehboob's Re-Invention of the Nation in Mother India", *Social Scientist*, Vol.30, No.9/10 (Sep.-Oct. 2002), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3517959>, date accessed 25 October 2013, p.76.
3. Dinkar, Ramdhari Singh, "Jantantra Ka Janm", in *Neel Kusum*, 1956.
4. The first decade (1947-1957) witnessed events which continue to govern our national and international politics and policy making-division of the country.
5. When Plato banished the poet from his 'Republic' as an unjust man who appeals to the basest emotions of a human being, little idea did he have of its historical importance in the coming centuries to carry the seeds of its times and contribute immensely in the recording and creation of knowledge in a society.
6. Panikkar, K.N., "Culture as a Site of Struggle", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.44, No.7, 14 February 2009, p.35.
7. Ibid., pp.38-9.
8. Marx and Engels, *On Literature and Art*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1976, pp.142-3.
9. Ibid., p.144.
10. A character played out in *Pyaasa*.
11. The protagonist of *Pyaasa* who is a poet riddled with existential issues, failures and poverty.
12. As mentioned in Munni Kabir, Nasreen, *Guru Dutt: A Life in Cinema*, OUP, New Delhi, 1996, p.82.
13. The full texts of the poems/ songs of *Pyaasa* written by Sahir Ludhianvi are conveniently available in Ludhianvi, Sahir, *Sahir Ludhianvi Aur Unki Shayari*, Prakash Pandit (ed.), Rajpal and Sons Publishers, Delhi, 2010; and Ludhianvi, *Sahir Ludhianvi Aur Unke Geet*, Compiled and edited by Ganga Prasad Sharma, Manoj Publications, Delhi, n.d.
14. As quoted by Kaufmann, Walter, *Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre*, Meridian Books, Thames and Hudson, London, 1957, p.42.
15. The song being "Jaane Who Kaise Log The Jinke Pyaar Ko Pyaar Mila".
16. As mentioned by Varma, Pavan K., *The Great Middle Class*, Viking, New Delhi, 1998, p.34.
17. Cooper, op.cit., pp.162-3.
18. As quoted in Munni Kabir, op.cit., p.128.
19. Mazumdar, Ranjani, *Bombay Cinema: An Archive of the City*, Permanent Black, Ranikhet, 2007, p.85.
20. For the full text of the poem refer to Ludhianvi, *Sahir Ludhianvi Aur Unke Geet*, op.cit., p.253.
21. Viridi, Jyotika, *The Cinematic Imagination: Indian Popular Films as Social History*, Permanent Black, Ranikhet, 2003, p.17.