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O. P. BHATANAGAR'S POETIC REGISTRATION OF PROTEST AGAINST INDIAN POLITICS

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Abstract

Political irony is very pungent in Bhatnagar's poetry. The soul of Indian democracy is murdered by the present day politicians. They try to reach the climax of power and authority through foul play in elections. This paper presents that politics and protest form the main theme of his poetry. He is a committed poet and sees no reason why poets and writers should not expose the multi-faceted evils of politics under which our people are groaning. Defending his commitment to human values, Bhatnagar says that pure politics is a way to freedom. But for own selfish ends we have corrupted it. In the wanton quest of power and authority, the politicians fail to understand infinite capacity of society. They too are crushed by the even-handed machine of oppression.

Keywords: Politics, protest, India, election, leaders, corruption

Introduction:

The writer is not a casual judge of his fellow countrymen and his contemporaries. He is an accomplice in all the evil that is committed in his own country and by his own people." (Bhatnagar, 3) It is with this humanistic commitment Bhatnagar probes the degenerate nature of our present politics and exhorts the writers to face the challenge lying ahead of them. As human beings are being used as slaves and usable articles, poetry must participate in building up the destiny of this nascent nation, and must act as conscience-keeper of its people.

Bhatnagar sees no reason why Indian poets should shirk politics, for "By writing on politics one does not have to turn to politics or join a political party; one has, for one's people, to do whatever that love demands. (Bhatnagar, 4) The poet urges the poets and writers to register their protest and rise in revolt against whatever is unjust in tradition, system or in institutions threatening the integrity of man "for protest and revolt affirms one's integrity as a basic value and nothing can do it better than poetry". (Iyanger, 44)

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Pure politics is a way to freedom but for our selfish interests we have corrupted it. It is surely not the freedom that the stalwarts of freedom longed for.

Literature Review

The poets of the thirties - Auden, Owen, Spender and MacNeice - have also expressed remorse at the decadence of modern traditions, conventions and institutions. K. R. Srinivas Iyenger's words are worth incorporating here. "In India the political and economic uncertainties of thirties led to some rethinking on the parts of the writers who came to be known as progressive and proletarians and literature of protest was the result". (Iyanger, 79)

Indian poets in English are conscious of the major problems our country is facing today. Degenerate politics is the major theme among many of the Indo-English poets. Shiv K. Kumar is very harsh about the corrupt politics of the contemporary politicians. In 'Epitaph of an Indian Politician' he portrays a politician's immorality thus: "Vasectomized of all genital urges for love and beauty, he often crossed floors as his wife often leaped across beds." (Articulate Silences)

Propaganda in literature is a derogatory term. Kasture distinguishing between propaganda and non-propaganda in literature observes: "If a deliberate stance is adopted by the poet to justify his thought

process, his poetry is reduced to propagandas. If on the other hand the poet's response is his attempt to transcend the solid seemingly wall of reality and fathom out the ultimate truth, his protest becomes the quest for values that make life meaningful and hence worth living". (Kasture 67)

Bhatnagar's Protest

Bhatnagar does not attempt to justify his thought process, but gives vent to his inner-most feelings about the chaos and corruption that are corroding Indian life today. His poetry is not only a mirrored reflection of the contemporary problems of our life, but it is also a marked search for human values that absolves his poetry of the charge of propaganda and invests it with true poetic worth. Hence, Bhatnagar's poetry can hardly be branded as mere propaganda. His poetry is an attempt to locate man in the matrix of existence. This matrix is intimately woven with the threads of politics. Politics today has become so all embracing that there is no vital area of our life which is not governed by the nature and quality of political life and atmosphere we are creating and living in. Not only his poetry but his prose too, eloquently voices the present decay in the context of our life, He observes: The idea of a new nation released from dreams has disappeared within a short span of thirty- five years. There are more inter caste and communal conflicts, the anti-social crimes like

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kidnapping, rape, murders, mass killing of Harijans, dacoity, looting of banks, open cheating and adulteration are on the increase. There is no fear of law and the so called strong men are ruling various sections of society. Labourers in the South Bihar are still being held as slaves; organized underground activities like making illicit liquor, arms, and medicines are remnant.

Anti-national activities like smuggling, hijacking, and espionage for enemies and making of counterfeit currency are multiplying. Large scale fraud of public money has become respectable virtue. Honesty, sense of devotion and conscience have become inoperative ideals. Flattery, chicanery, nepotism and opportunism have displaced moral conduct. All the plans and programmes of social and tribal welfare of poor people are disposed off on paper and in speeches to devour funds. All these because there are no morals and integrity left worth the name in politics. (Bhatnagar 9) Bhatnagar as a sensitive artist questions: Now under this pathetic situation, is a poet to sit silent, or wax personal or romantic, must he continue to enjoy the luxury of pure aesthetics and not own the necessity of commitment? The writers and poets therefore must protest and expose realities, before the people, for acquiescence has a tendency to attract the degenerate into power. (Bhatnagar 13) The poet therefore strongly urges the Indian poets to revolt

against the corruption being infused by politics.

For Bhatnagar poetry is a means to emancipate the human spirit from the corroding realities of modern times. This does not mean that he resorts to didacticism or tries to forcibly inculcate his message. Disclaiming realism for propaganda he contends: "Indian poetry in English can afford to be socially conscious or concerned but it must never be tool of social criticism and force itself to face facts". (Bhatnagar 13) What he intends to convey here is that poetry should not be all indoctrination but a way of revealing the vast panorama of life. It is with this humanistic commitment Bhatnagar probes the degenerate nature of our present politics and exhorts the writers to face the challenge lying ahead of them. As human beings are being used as slaves and usable articles, poetry must participate in building up the destiny of this nascent nation, and must act as conscience-keeper of its people.

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integrity of man "for protest and revolt affirms one's integrity as a basic value and nothing can do it better than poetry".(Bhatnagar 3).Pure politics is a way to freedom but for our selfish interests we have corrupted it. It is surely not the freedom that the stalwarts of freedom longed for.

Like Anand, Bhatnagar is humanist to the core. All his poems and other writings amply reveal his utmost concern for the common man everywhere on this earth. Man therefore is at the centre of his creative world. Even after fifty years of independence, the common man in India is still exploited, ill treated, oppressed, humiliated and denied his basic rights. He blames corrupt politics for the miserable lot of the common people and perversion and loss of human values. He therefore appeals to sensitive people like poets to reveal the havoc that the degraded politics has ushered in Indian life and institutions. He shows the way, that is protest and revolution to counter these evils. To him, "suffering leads to slavery and revolt is the harbinger of freedom. Bhatnagar cries halt to the servile imitation of the past and reminds the readers of the need to change human values." (Bhatnagar 8) "How long shall we argue Our life into rustic logic Like envelops pasted With cancelled stamps. (The New Scale, Thought Poems,10)

The prominent protest poems in Bhatnagar's first volume of poetry, Thought Poems (1976) are 'Nailing by the Walls', 'A Lucky Star to Hang on'' and 'Getting to Live'. In his second volume 'Feeling Fossils' (1977) we have the following protest poems 'Crossing the Bar', 'Birth of a Nation', 'The No Man's Land', 'Over a chair', and 'Mass Killing'. The third volume 'Angles of Retreat' (1979) contains 'A.C.Trains', 'Look Home Ward Angel', 'History is a Sorry-Go-Round', 'Beggars can be Choosers', 'Thoughts on Election Day in India'. In the fourth volume entitled Oneiric Visions (1980) the following poems are significant : 'I can Question My Dreams', 'What is the Difference', 'If one Starts Asking Questions Like Hamlet', 'On the Cross Road', 'The Peacock', and 'Striptease'. The fifth volume 'Shadow in Flood Lights' is enriched with the following poems: 'Of Poetry', 'Revolutions and Dreams', 'The Living Scene', 'Of Slavery and Freedom' and the sixth volume entitled 'The Audible Landscape' is conspicuous for the following poems: 'A Prisoner is More Free', 'Can Facts be Destroyed by Ideas', 'The Still Questions', 'The New Morality', 'The Second Coming', 'Of Pains and Art', 'Grandeurs of Self Deceit'' and 'On Seeing Rashtrapati Bhawan'. In the seventh volume Cooling Flames of Darkness 'The Turn of the Century', Ravaged Children of Civilised Times, 'Appetites at Kalahandi', 'The

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Nuclear Suffering' reveal his feeling of protest.

Politics is the key word of our life today, and it is playing havoc in the country. Our democracy lives on elections. But in our country we see its corrupt and distorted face every time. It has become a game of money and votes. It is an acknowledged fact that despite the claims of the Government about electoral reforms, it will remain a game of muscle, power and money. The average voter in our country is illiterate and is unaware of the significance of his franchise.

The election agents "flirt like gay birds pecking at every fruit in the Eden garden where plucky political dreams thrive". (Angles of Retreat, 46) The ignorant voters use their franchise injudiciously. In his poem 'Thought on Election Day in India' Bhatnagar ridicules it: "The ignorant voters in their routine queue up day dreaming And in a passion of a second get rid of their oscillating indecision stamping symbols for men" (Angles of Retreat, 46)

These founders of democracy are let by part political pandits and seal their illiterate favours in steel boxes "Once every five years there would be new political miracles." (Angles of Retreat, 46)

Instead of five years, now the new political miracles occur almost every six months in some parts of the country. Bhatnagar has a keen eye for the election process. The illiterate voters are purchased

by the pert politicians and get their votes cast in their favour. After the voting is over the contestants indulge in all sort of conjectures about the success and the defeat of the adversaries: "Speculations and calculations flood in smoke rings, breaking hopes and fears into myriads of thoughts." (Angles of Retreat, 46)

Bhatnagar's poetry abounds in symbols of corruption. The integrity of a patriot and virtues such as self-denial and sacrifice are things of past. The man once known for his daring sacrifice is busy amassing wealth through political tricks. He is trying to get power with slimy ease. His decayed corrupt mind is represented by his ugly peacock feet. He is no more a patriot but deeply involved in power politics. In 'The Peacock' he realistically presents politician: "He now arranges lobbies against labour strikes in dubious discordant roles" (Oeniric Vision, 42) The politicians today only have one aim and that is collection of wealth and power by any means. Floor-crossing has become very common. Integrity has been replaced by dishonesty. The poem 'Crossing the Bar' expresses this idea: "The big news is floor crossing to keep our progress moving towards unrealized goals." (Feeling Fossils, 13)

Our country is passing through a crisis created by uncertainty and political misappropriations. The meek and idealists are misfits in the present set-up. In

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‘The Unbroken Dreams’, the poet voices his concern: “People who plead revolution from belvederes, they hang their tortured ideals on tree like dew drawing empty centuries into metaphor of unbroken dreams in vacant eyes of innocents.” (Oeniric Vision, 58)

Even after fifty years of independence we have not found any place to anchor our faith in. We are vexed at the sense of uprootedness. The land where we live on, neither belonged to us before the British came nor does it now, after they have left. It belongs to the rulers; others are mere refugees, In ‘No Man's Land’ the poet says: “The land belongs to those who rule the others merely inhabit the no man’s land.” (Feeling Fossils, 19)

Even after fifty years of independence, the common man in India is still ill-treated, oppressed, and exploited. All the cherished dreams of Bhatnagar about the post-independence prosperity have been belied. When he analyses the "matrix of existence" in modern India, he finds it to be largely woven with warp and woof mainly political in nature, and traces the perversions and loss of values in national life to corrupt politics. He is of the opinion that "politics today has become so all-embracing that there is no vital area of our life which is not governed by the nature and quality of the political life and atmosphere."(Bhatnagar 6) Bhatnagar

believes that "all social thoughts and forms at a level of wider application ...are political." (Bhatnagar 8)

Politics in India has created a wilderness for common man, and in that jungle everything human has collapsed and their world has been taken over by politicians who use them as political pawns. Politics has created “Hell [which] Has No Limit" (to borrow Jose Donso the Chilean novelist's title of his novel). Life is made of "visions sold by gangsters" of politics, and defiled by "radio activity of sin" religious and moral. So he launches a frontal attack on politics and social and religious institutions. Little wonder, the bulk of his poetry is political in nature. In his long essay "Politics as Metaphor" for Indian Poetry in English, Bhatnagar enters a strong plea for sensitive people like poets embracing politics without taking sides with political parties or doctrines to save human spirit from corruption brought about by “servile, selfish, and sterile politic” and liberate the people and times "trapped in the quagmire of degenerate politics".

Bhatnagar is deeply hurt because of the massacre committed during the partition. He pathetically describes the cruel butchering of an innocent girl at the birth of a nation: “She was only thirteen when she was butchered on the birth of a nation”. (Feeling Fossils, 14)

The politicians are so heartless that no atrocity howsoever grotesque ever touches

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their heart. To hide their crimes they effect a hurried burial. The poet does not grieve over the loss of life as much as the callous indifference and inconsiderate attitude to it. The poet mourns the mass frenzy of cruelty in 'Drying in the Memory Jars': "He only thinks of those days when there was no time to be unhappy, and set them against his broken dreams, a scar, a wound sears the soul remembering his children butchered in the frenzy of newly won freedom. (Thought Poems, 26)

The poet looks aggrieved at the massacre in Bangladesh, Vietnam and Punjab; but he also seems to reconcile himself to the prevailing situation with uneasiness. In the Poem 'Mass Killing' he writes: "I have long abandoned the exposures in a cave of mossy forgetfulness, but the silence of it is louder than the shrieks the dead gave." (Feeling Fossils, 30)

A big gap yawns between the promise and performance of political leaders. Their empty promises draw the poet's attention: "Slogans sermons and speeches make good our hunger, foundation stones and inaugurations fulfil our hopes" (Shadows of Floodlights, 21)

Even historical monuments of our country like the Rashtrapati Bhawan have now become a place of maligned politics. It has lost its sanctity and the grandeur it used to have when eminent personalities like Rajendra Prasad and Radhakrishnan lived

there. In 'On Seeing the Rashtrapati Bhawan', the poet articulates his contempt: "This is the place where in relaxed conspiracies, the rulers like Dracula vowed to lengthen their shadows over this land. Now it's a place not taken over, but made easy for the diplomats to meet over toasts to the health of the poor the glass can hold." (Audible Landscape, 32)

This strain of political protest runs through the entire range of Bhatnagar's poetry. It is more virulently marked in his new poems where his anger against the exploitation of man erupts like volcano: "Then came the platitudes like violence and more violence precedes any peace, and no price is worth too much for even a short lived peace is blurred by the self styled politicians, and churned out the historians of peace." (Poetry Time, 9)

Conclusion

Our tragedy is due to our forced compromise with evil. An average Indian has no voice and iron will to ameliorate his lot. But if he is to survive, he must resort to revolt which is the most effective and the shortest way to success. Bhatnagar is of the opinion that measures suggested by the Western poets will not work in the Indian context. He observes: "In our context even the antidote to decay found by Eliot, Joyce, Yeats, Faulkner, and Hemingway in myth and faith would not do. For it has a root in irrationality, surrendering and enslaving the individual to tradition. He will have to seek

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his catharsis in revolt against evasion, misplaced ideals, faded myths, defunct traditions, acquiescence in corruption and indignities of man". (Bhatnagar 23)

Now the question is: What prevents the common man to seek redress in revolt? Obviously, it is his "age old love for saintly robes rather than revolution". (Oeniric Vision, 48). In 'Orange for a Sport' Bhatnagar expresses his feelings: "Revolution is not in our blood, our Gods are presented with red flowers, and women beautified with red spots on their foreheads." (Oeniric Vision, 48)

Bhatnagar probes the genesis of our passive nature in our antique values of tolerance and suffering. He is full of rage at our altitude of compromise. He fervently asks thus:

What resilience holds us to our condition
What inertia keeps us back from action
Even a bee stings, and ant pinches;
Alas! A tortoise can but save his neck
So, let the common man at least rise like a
frail flag
Though shivering, make wind visible,
Anger and contempt become organic
Humility into tolerable
Surrender over come without anabolic
steroid
And endurance impregnated with revolt
(Audible Landscape, 39)

Common man's frustration as indicated in the poetry of Bhatnagar is similar to that delineated by T.S.Eliot in his 'The Waste Land'. But Eliot does not speak of revolt as a gateway to emancipation. He is inclined to believe that India still harbours some hope of regeneration as is indicated by clouds gathering over the 'Himvant', and in the message of 'Shanti, Daya' and 'Damyata'. The poet writes in 'What the Thunder said':

"Ganga was sunken and the limp leaves
Waited for rain, while the black clouds
Gathered for distant over Himavant
(Feeling Fossils, 27)

From the clouds, the poet hears the message of Datta, Dayadhyan, Damatya, Shantih, Shantih, Shatih.

In "History is a Sorry-Go-Round", Bhatnagar views the suppressed people as torch hearers of conscience and condemns the crafty politicians who, in the "opacity of their conscience", delude and deceive them. The poet ardently hopes that the common man will once rise like Phoenix from his own ashes and restore the glory of man:
Like phoenix risen from the ashes
The crucified that have but kept
The candle of conscience alight
In the deserted temple of forgotten ideals
Can now raise cleanse and enlighten
The strained glory of man
(Angles of Retreat, 41)

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