

Mahatma Gandhi On The Objectives And Functions Of Literature

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Abstract

Mahatma Gandhi was an Indian lawyer, politician, social activist and writer fought against the British rule to get the freedom from its clutches. Generally people remembered him as a political leader and social activist but along with that he also saw the path to Indian writers who were greatly influenced by the British scholars and turned their backs from the ordinary people. In India, early 20th century is called as the Gandhian era where one can find the impact of Gandhi on Indian writers. At various occasions he spoke of the objectives and functions of literature which can be studied as his influence on writers of the age. Unlike history, literature constructs the events, ages and beliefs of people and also embosses the cultural backgrounds to show the life of the people who live in that particular age. Pre-gandhian era was lacking that sense of projection of society and it needs to be revived. Although Gandhi was not a literary critic but he felt that literature needs to be polished. He too understood that during that time many writers like frog in the well, confined to their own language and culture and satisfied them; they didn't want to see out of their cocoon. Though he didn't have deep knowledge of art and creation but he had a sense of literature and he felt that literature is the medium through which one can lead people and make them aware about their situation; therefore, he more persistent on the language and the style of literature. Thus, the present paper more focuses on Gandhiji's views about literature and literary language.

Keywords: Mahatma Gandhi, Gandhian era, Functions of literature, literary language.

I

Mahatma Gandhi was unquestionably one person who left an immense impact not only, on the political scenes, but also on the social sphere, economic sphere and literature. Though he was not a writer, properly so called, and even not interested in art of writing but he had wrote and talked a great deal which influenced not only the writers of the age but till the date its valid and people admire his works and implement his words, either on their life or in their literature. As K R Srinivasa Iyengar aptly said,

Gandhi the speaker, the writer, used language – be it Gujarati, English or Hindi – as a necessary too, just as he used his spectacles, his walking stick, or his safety razor. Writing with him was not for writing's sake, nor speaking for speaking's sake, but rather for achieving communication, for conveying information, for converting people to his point of view. (263)

Though Gandhiji knew many languages but he rigorously used common man's language, so that he could find out the condition and problems of village people. Not only that but when it terms to spoke of literature and the objectives of literature, it all requisites to provide literature to ordinary people. Surprisingly, there is an ample study available about Gandhian philosophy and his role in Indian Literature but no one try to find out Gandhiji's views about the objective of literature and more precisely his views about language of literature. This paper seeks to explore Gandhiji's views about purpose of literature, theme of literature and language of literature. As 'literature' seems to be the 'mirror of society', Gandhiji too wants to use this tool to make people understand their situation and introduce them the new world around them. However, the present paper focuses on Gandhiji's impact on Indian literature in general and his thoughts about literature in particular.

II

Bhabhani Bhattacharya in his *Gandhi: A Writer* aptly noted about the condition of literature, "Indian Writing in those days was marked by pomposity. Heavy, involved sentences brought much more credit to a writer than simple, direct ones that even a schoolboy

could write! Pomposity was reckoned a literary grace” (114). But Gandhiji brought the change with his own writing style. His writing was ‘a sharp departure from “ornateness and artistry”’ (114) and such writing can only be meant for the people of the village. In his one of the speeches of Sahitya Akademi Sabha, he opined that, “For whose sake are we going to have our literature? For Kasturbhai & Co.? For Ambalalbai or Sir Chinubhai? Not certainly for the great gentry of Ahmedabad. They can afford to engage literary men and have great libraries at their homes. But what about the poor man at the well who with unspeakable abuse is goading his bullocks to pull the big leather-bucket? ” (Vol. 70, 31) However, he felt that literature needs to create for such people.

Mahatma Gandhi throughout his life lived with the ideal of ‘simple living and high thinking’; likewise, he too presented his writings to the people in very simple manner. The letters which he wrote, the story of his experiments which he shared and futuristic vision which he saw (Indian Home rule) presented in very apparent and easy manner. Like western writers, he didn’t have aesthetic vision of style of literary art but whatever he spoke and wrote gave a clear understanding of his vision and point of view. Bhabhani Bhattacharya clearly remarked about the style of his writing, “Gandhi’s interests were never aesthetic, but rather pragmatic. He had no desire, no ambition, no time, to be an artist. So he wrote with disciplined simplicity, seeking only to make himself clearly understood. The result was the one most important quality of literary art – namely, clarity.” (113) Likewise, he felt that art and literature should follow the same pattern of simplicity so that it could reach to the ordinary people.

Like Tolstoy, Gandhiji disproved the concept of “art for art’s sake” and like Plato, he too had the ideal picture of art and accepted those art that represent only truth. During his meeting with Romain Rolland, he said:

For me all art must be based on truth, I reject beautiful things if instead of expressing truth, they express untruth, I accept the formula ‘Art brings joy and is good’, but on the condition I mentioned. To achieve Truth in art, I do not expect exact reproduction of the external things. Only living things bring living joy to the soul and must elevate the soul. (Bhattacharya: 172-3)

Though some of the views of Gandhi seem a layman's thought but in reality he represented the minds of villagers in front of the writers. In his one of the speeches delivered in Sahitya Akademi Sabha, he opined that, "you may be writing entertaining stories but these are not going to make any impression upon their minds" (Vol. 70: 37-8). As he lived in villages, he was well acquainted with the truth that most of the villagers were illiterate. They hardly knew about the stories of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. He was very much concerned about the villagers and felt that they should understand their own situation; apparently he advised writers to create literature for villager's sake and for that he invited writers to stay with the villagers and understand their situation. He said, 'I entreat our writers to begin writing for our dumb masses rather than for our city-dwellers', he also opined that one can developed his/her mind in village only;

If you wish to develop your mind, you should study village implements, understand their good points and bad points and then write about them. Those whose minds are fresh will find new things to see and to learn in villages. It is not true that your mental development becomes stunned when you go to the villages. My reply to those who say this would be that they must have gone there with close minds. Actually the village, and not the city, is the place for the development of the mind. (Vol.70: 38)

Gandhiji also noted that literature which was available in those days was confined to the language in which it was written. He deplored the present state of things where people were, so to say, in a high bound way content to remain in their own linguistic and cultural wells, not ready even to acquaint themselves with the language and literature of their neighbouring provinces. He also urged that, "we must not only seek to know the picaresque language of village folk, but also to spread knowledge of modern useful literature among the villagers. It is a shame that Chaitanya's lyrics are a sealed book to people outside Bengal and Orissa" (Vol.68: 381). Along with his concerned for the villagers, he also wanted that everyone could taste the literature of the different provinces and could be spread across the nation.

According to him, 'literature of wider appeal can only spread by a widely spoken language' (Vol.68: 382) and with that he meant that Hindi – Hindustani could be the one

language across the nation. By saying this, he didn't devalue the regional languages, but he felt that people also have the knowledge of their neighbouring provinces and it was not possible without fixing the medium of communication among the people. As in India one could see the diversity of languages spoken and written; there was a need of time to fix one language for spreading the knowledge. When he urged for the translation of regional literature into language widely available to people, he didn't mean to increase the number of books but rather wanted such literature which 'fosters unity, morality, valour and such other qualities' (Vol. 68: 382) and also wanted to spread the knowledge of science to every province. He went to the extreme when he said, "If I had the power I should taboo all literature calculated to promote communalism, fanaticism and ill will and hatred between individuals, classes or races" (Vol.68: 382). He also visualized the condition of literature in time to come when he said, "If we sincerely hope to enrich Indian literature, we have to carry the gems hidden in the different languages to the crores of Indian masses" (Vol.68: 383) and according to him it was only possible through 'Hindustani'.

Not only had that he also commented on the genre of literature which may be considered as a layman's views but during those time at some extent his views were valid. He opined about the novels, "Reading of novels has become a passion. These are sprouting like mushrooms. If you want to know how a novel is written, I can tell you a good deal about it. But it cannot be described before civilized men and women. One's imagination can run riot, it knows no restraints. However, one can do without these novels" (Vol.70: 36-7).

III

As a man of practice, Gandhi knew about his limitation of the knowledge which he had, no respect to whatsoever area he spoke of! In respect to that he discussed his limitations with Rabindranath Tagore and said that,

The Poet (Tagore) lives in a magnificent world of his own creation, his world of ideas. I am a slave of somebody else's creation, the spinning wheel... The Poet is an inventor; he creates, destroys and recreates. I am an explorer and having discovered a thing I must cling to it. The presents the world with new and attractive things from day

to day, I can merely show the hidden possibilities of old and worn-out things. (Bhattacharya: 111)

Gandhiji knew that his views were layman's views, but whatever he had discussed and plead to the writers was a need of the time because the majority of writers rushed to create the literature in English and influenced a lot by the British embassy. Moreover, during that period literature was the means of scholars and city-dwellers but it needs to be reached to the villagers. In a general, the function of the literature is 'to teach', and Gandhi was aware of the so-called 'truth' about the function of literary art. With the help of literature, he wanted that everyone should know the reality and understand the true nature of British imperialism. He only wanted that 'art and literature', so to say can 'speak to the millions'. (Vol.70: 34)

Work-cited

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