

Understanding Progressivism through *Tarpan*: The Film

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Abstract

The paper is an attempt to understand the purpose of Art with keeping into the view of the conformation of Progressive Movement in Europe; its efficacy in the genesis of All India Progressive Writers' Association and the perusal of progressive elements in the Hindi film *Tarpan* (The Absolution) by contextualizing the Progressive movement. Within the paper, attempt has been made to understand one of the momentous phenomena, progressivism and its ascendant influence on various other art forms like motion picture.

Keywords: Progressive Writers' Association, *Tarpan* (The Absolution), Contextualizing Progressive Movement.

Many connoisseurs in different ages tried to theorize various Arts. These theories attempt to demarcate the motives of art forms. But it is still not so simple to delineate the motives of Art as it has many variants, depending on person and perspective. For Mr. A, art may be the pavement that leads to the name and fame, whereas for Mr. B, it may be the business to get financial or commercial gains, while for Mr. C, it may be the tool to exonerate from emotions and feelings which are wandering inside his skull, means to have aesthetic *catharsis*. The statement has universal application on all forms of art. The Art, here is the umbrella term that covers various genres like visual i.e. painting, image, decorative; audio i.e. musical or non-musical composition; logogram i.e. poetry, drama, novel, story; or audio-visual i.e. film, documentary, advertisement or serial program. It is universally acknowledged that every art presentation is the outcome of some direct or indirect spur. For instance, one of the world famous paintings, *The Last Supper*. We are indebted to Leonardo the Vinci, for the rarest of the rare art presentation. The painting presents the last supper of Jesus Crist with his twelve fellow mates. As statement theorized, the Vinci was bear up with the Gospel of John (13:21), and indeed, it is the source that emboldened him to present the scrumptious metamorphosis of the logographic composition into colored painting on paper.

The statement is well suited to all logographic arts as well. This would be a very common narrow sense of understanding that the various logographic art forms like poetry, drama, and novel etc., are the only subject to human enjoyment or pleasure. Certainly not. Literature as an artistic presentation is not only for human enjoyment or pleasure but may also be used as a tool to reflect the bugs and demerits of the society. As mentioned earlier, every art presentation is the outcome of some direct or indirect inspiration from surrounding that is nothing but the society. Actually this very idea suggests us to refer Progressivism. The idea has its origin as idea of progress which is the base of Progressivism.

Progressivism as a philosophic term has the idea of progress in the center. It is about the change or advancement in various aspects of life or in the perspective to see the aspects of life. A German philosopher, Immanuel Kant sees Progressivism as a change in the social lifestyle or in living standard of Europeans from barbarian to civilized way of lifestyle. It is a change not only in social aspect of life but also simultaneous change in various aspects like economy, science and technology. The idea, further developed and popularized with the passage of time by various philosophers and writers. As its consequence or impression, a huge change took place in all walks of life. A new ideology was formulated among the people to see the progress or to work for progress.

The idea was circulated throughout the world. It was the cruelest time under colonial rule in which countries like India were fighting for freedom against hegemonic governance tactics of European hakims through every possible way. Even the field of literature followed the principle and idea of progress. In colonial India, the theory of progress was practiced by various Indian writers through their writings. Under the impression of Progressivism, in 1935 in London, a group of Indian writers under the leadership of Sajjad Zaheer, decided to constitute a writers' group that was named as 'All India Progressive Writers' Association' which was alleged to have communist ideology. The writers who had participated actively in the association included Dr. Mukraja Anand, Jyotirmaya Ghosh, Amhed Ali, Ralph Fox, the British writer and more. They had a common dream to bring momentous change in Indian literature written in English and other Indian vernacular languages. They decided to write neither to promote orthodox and traditional practices of Indian society nor for human enjoyment or pleasure. But, they decided to write for common interest and about common account of people by supporting social justice, social equality and against social backwardness. The major agenda of the association can be seen after reading its manifesto that was formulated by the association and was circulated both in Hindi and English languages later on among the intellectuals in India and abroad. Keeping the particular aims in mind, the following resolutions had been adopted by the association:

- (i) The establishment of organizations of writers to correspond to the various linguistic zones of India; the coordination of these organizations by holding conferences, publishing of magazines, pamphlets, etc. (ii) To cooperate with those literary organizations whose aim do not conflict with the basic aims of the association. (iii) To produce and translate literature of a progressive nature and of a high technical standard; to fight cultural reaction; and in this way, to further the cause of Indian freedom and social regeneration. (iv) To strive for the acceptance of a common language (Hindustani) and a common script (Indo-Roman) for India. [This demand

was later dropped in appreciation of the India's multilingual structure—ed.]
 (v) To protect the interests of authors; to help authors who require and deserve assistance for the publication of their works. (vi) To fight for the right of free expression of thought and opinion.

Like other Arts, Film which is the audio and video composition in motion, also shares the common feature of art and follows the particular purpose. Indian Cinema recently registered its hundred years' existence. It has released ample number of films dealing with variety of subjects as its key plot themes and out of them are many which promote the common agenda, ideology and beliefs of Progressive Writers Movement. Only difference is of the form where one functions with lexemes and another with motion pictures. There are many movies which highly promote Progressivism and follow its major footprints in the movies. Among such, is the Hindi movie, *Tarpan* which emerges as a slash on the orthodox and conventional purpose of Indian Hindi movies production.

The movie, *Tarpan* which means The Absolution, has number of progressive elements and is at the same ground to attack on social injustice and inequality which the progressive writers used to attack on. The movie is the joint venture of National Film Development Board and Doordarshan and was released in 1995. As the name suggests, the movie has the absolution as its principle theme. The movie is based on four interrelated stories and sets in a fictitious village in Rajasthan where four sins of villagers led the village toward a curse that no girl child in the village managed to survive after the age of seven. These four sinners emancipated in order to let the village out of the jaw of curse. The village has two classes i.e. Thakur or the upper class and the shepherds or the lower class. The movie, particularly attacks the social inequality where the upper caste has full domination over lower caste. The movie speaks out the prolonged gap between the two classes. In the first story of the movie, the protagonist Shavitri who is daughter of a shepherd, falls in love with son of a Thakur, Sukhpal. Despite having caste difference both love each other so passionately and later on, somehow managed to marry each other. But in the house of Thakurs, Shavitri was jeered and tortured by her mother-in-law and the Thakur community in account of her belongingness to lower caste. And consequently, Shavitri was thrown in to well by her mother-in-law deliberately in order to maintain social values and to remarry his son to a girl of her own community. The story criticizes the orthodox customs of Indian societies where inter-caste marriages are considered as worse, dangerous and unadvisable form of marriage that cost the lives many times. The second story portrays the hegemonic nature of the upper caste over the lowers. One who is in majority must be sensitive toward the minority. In the story, all the fertile land of the village is forcefully occupied by the Thakurs in which the shepherds are forbade to enter with their goats. The story highlights the famous maxim of Lord Axon, "Power corrupts but absolute power corrupts absolutely." The story criticized the power that the dominant or prevalent authority has in its possession and the misuse of that power against the marginalized.

The third story shares the bitter truth of the lower caste communities. The story talks about two problems i.e. livelihood and beauty, which are encountered by Dalits in particular. In the story, Dhanno, belongs to lower caste, makes to work so hard by the upper caste landlord in order to earn livelihood. His wife Sumitra, his ill mother and his younger brother dependent on Dhanno, the only working son in the family. In spite of working too hard,

Dhanno could not able to fulfill even the basic needs of the family. This shows the true picture of laborers. The condition of the workers can be understand with the dialogue of Lakhan Thakur:

“These shepherds are like animals which do not work without stick.” (01:26:05)

The dialogue portrays the clear picture of the code of conduct of the upper caste community with workers like Dhanno. His wife Sumitra decides to help her husband to earn more livelihood so that Dhanno might able to afford the treatment of his ill mother. But Sumitra’s beauty gets lusty attention of upper caste landlord who entraps her with baits like clothes, wheat, and other domestic goods. Accepting the destiny, Sumitra compromises with her conscience unwillingly. Here raises a question of beauty of Dalit woman that is considered as a curse. Notable Dalit thinkers Pramanshi Jaideva and Sanjay Paswan also address the same issue, thus write:

“Beauty is a curse when it blesses one of Dalit, who have a saying: ‘If she’s beautiful, she’s someone else’s wife; mine’s is ugly.’ A good looking woman is the target of all men’s desire” (p.110).

As the story develops, Dhanno comes to know about the illicit and forceful relationship of the landlord with his wife. But he is murdered by the same upper caste landlord in order to save himself of defamation in village. And the illicit girl child is also not accepted by the landlord later on. This portion of the story reflects the condition of woman especially in the lower caste. The fourth and last story depicts about the misuse of duties and responsibility of the authority i.e. gram panchayat and sarpanch. In the story the power is misused by the Sarpanch in the well fare of his own community and to suppress the lower caste community where otherwise the authority must do equal justice to all who fall in the vicinity of the authority.

Conclusion

The film is a perfect example to understand the Progressivism. The film through its four stories elevate and advocate social equality, social justice to all and fight against social backwardness. Following the same footprints, the film also raises the same questions by supporting the democratic values. The film is highly loaded with the circumstances which are very helpful to understand the film and are full of progressive elements. In the broader sense of understanding, the film raises sedate issues prevalent in Indian society and also attacks with full might. The film talks about one of the absolute institutions of Indian society i.e. Caste. The ideology that progressive writers’ movement follows, is anti-religion and anti-caste. When juxtapose, it may be seemed that the movies is the mouth piece of the writers associated to Progressive Writers’ Association. Various progressive writers have pointed out the very institution in their writings in order to abolish the caste system from the society.

Apart from it, the film also questions the gender based discrimination and treatment. The issue of Woman and especially Dalit woman has been discussed here. The film shows how women are treated by the patriarchy. The episode of Sumitra here is the perfect example to substantiate the statement. The real image of Dalit woman is seen in the dialogue of Ramo, an old lady of village:

“Woman, like a well, is used to get personal gain, sometimes used as bin to throw garbage and at last to wash the bloody hands.” (01:35:15)

To conclude, the film paints a fine painting of vivid colors of the society. It notifies the people to have common and necessary goodness for all, to have unbiased treatment for all and humanistic acknowledgment to all because these are very necessary for real progress and to be better than yesterday.

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