

BHISHAM SAHNI*

*Contours of Our Composite Culture***

I feel honoured to have been invited to participate in this series of lectures dedicated to the memory of one who made pivotal contribution to both political and cultural spheres of our national life. Shri P.C. Joshi had become quite a legendary figure even in early forties. To me, besides his political contribution, he was the founding father of the IPTA, a cultural association, formed in those very days, which soon developed into a powerful countrywide movement. Cultural workers with a sense of social concern began to gravitate to it in large numbers. The first performance of an IPTA squad that I saw was during the dark days of the Bengal Famine, when a small group of five or six stage artists, hailing from Calcutta gave a performance in my home-town of Rawalpindi, depicting the grim, hair-raising reality of the Bengal Famine. The performance was very much in the nature of a street-play, but it was graphic, so heartrending in its presentation, that when, at the close of it, the players moved among the audience, to collect donations, a young lady, sitting in front of me, took off her gold ear-rings and gave over to them. Even to-day, I am moved to my depths whenever I remember that performance. Soon enough, the IPTA was functioning almost all over India, its music, dance and drama squads were performing in almost every province of India. My own brother (Balraj Sahni), immediately on his return from England in mid-forties, where he had been working as announcer in the BBC during war years, plunged heart and soul into the activities of the IPTA. A little later, I too found myself in the vortex of its activities.

It was in those hectic days that I met Shri P.C. Joshi for the first time. I was taken by surprise when my brother introduced me to

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him. I saw before me a carelessly dressed person, his shorts coming down to his knees, a pair of old chappals on his feet, chewing tobacco. Surely, I said to myself, this could not be P.C. Joshi, whose name was on everyone's lips. But when he put his hand on my shoulder with a loving glint in his eyes and a radiant smile on his lips, my doubts were dispelled.

The Hindustani Drama Group, of which I too soon became an active member, would stage plays in different localities in Bombay, sometimes on an improvised stage, at others, in the streets itself. Communal tension was mounting in those days, and I remember, on two occasions, stones were hurled from dark street corners at the performers. This was not a new thing for the IPTA artists, I was told. Such occurrences were quite frequent, but the IPTA artists, with their deep sense of dedication to a cause, faced them dauntlessly.

I am dilating on the IPTA, a brain-child of P.C. Joshi, not only because it was a unique contribution made by him, but also because it embodied some of the most essential features of our cultural heritage. IPTA had broken out of the stuffy theatre-halls and gone straight to the people. It spoke in the language of the people. While it drew heavily on the traditional folk-forms, be it 'Nautanki' or 'Pavda', popular among the people of the area, its performances had a contemporary thrust, it tackled issues that faced society and was forward-looking and highly innovative. And above all, it was inspired by an ideology that breathed of freedom, of secular values, of equality and social justice. And its platform was shared by all linguistic and cultural groups from all parts of the country on terms of complete equality and mutual respect.

The concept of the IPTA corresponded very well with the kind of society we live in. We are a multi-lingual, multi-religious, multi-racial society. We all live in an environment where many languages are spoken, people with different faiths and beliefs live side by side and interact with one another. Such is the character of our society and it has been so for centuries. Over the centuries people have evolved, to a large extent, a community of outlook and a set of common values, common languages and even customs, which have continued to exercise a pervasive influence over our lives.

But time and again in our history, and more so during the last few decades, deliberate efforts have been made to whip up differences and create rifts among the people and sow the seeds of hatred and mistrust among them. With the result that to-day, the atmosphere is charged with divisive attitudes.

Yet, even in my younger days, I remember, there was much greater tolerance and goodwill, and we lived in a more relaxed atmosphere. My father was a devout Arya Samajist and a great votary of Hindi and Sanskrit, yet he did all his correspondence in Urdu. His letters, even to his sons, were written in Urdu. At home we used to receive a weekly newspaper, named *Arya Gazette*, which used to be full of exhortations for the study of Hindi and Sanskrit, but the paper was printed in the Urdu language. Once, I remember, my father, despite his love for Hindi and Sanskrit, very seriously advised me that if ever I had an opportunity to study Persian, I should do so. He himself had studied Persian and was a great lover of Persian poetry, and frequently recited couplets from 'Gulistan' and 'Bostan' of Sheikh Sa'adi.

So it was that while we conversed in our mother-tongue, Punjabi, a Panditji would come to teach us Hindi and Sanskrit at home, at school the medium of instruction was Urdu and in higher classes, English. A person whose younger days have been spent in close association with a number of languages, cannot but develop a close liking for each one of them. It is inevitable. Most of us Indians live in a multilingual atmosphere and feel quite comfortable using a number of languages and dialects in our daily lives. Language, by its very nature, is a medium that brings people closer together. It plays a unifying role, it removes psychological barriers and is a powerful medium of cohesion and cultural integration. We in India are fortunate that we live and breathe in a multilingual atmosphere. That itself is conducive to the promotion of greater understanding. Any effort, therefore, to divide people on linguistic lines will corrode this healthy, multilingual atmosphere.

Similarly, in the sphere of religious belief too, there was greater tolerance and consideration, and we lived in a freer atmosphere. My mother, besides going to the weekly congregations of the Arya Samaj, would frequently go to the Gurudwara also. Almost every afternoon, my mother would disappear from the house and we would learn later that she had gone to listen to the discourse of some Sadhu or other, somewhere. She herself would not know to which sect or faith he belonged. "Good words fall from their mouths, son", she would say, "it does me good to listen to them." And we all know that even to-day, thousands of our countrymen flock to the 'dargahs' or shrines of some 'pir' or holyman to offer their obeisances, irrespective of the religious faith to which they belonged, that one of the most frequented temples in Delhi even to-day is the temple of Sai Baba who was a Muslim by birth. Even in my own younger days, a young sanyasi'

who visited our house regularly, Vigyananand was his name, was, by birth, a Muslim. After the partition of the country, he would sometimes go to Pakistan, to meet his elder brother who lived there.

But, as I said, in those remote days, attitudes had not yet hardened, there was greater give and take and the atmosphere was more relaxed. As time passed, however, narrow, sectarian attitudes were deliberately fostered and separatist tendencies began to appear with disastrous effects.

In 1957, I went to Moscow to work as a translator. By that time linguistic chauvinism had already raised its head in India and had begun to produce tensions here and there. While in Moscow, I remember, on one occasion, I went to the French Embassy to get a visa. As I sat down in the lobby, I saw another Indian gentleman sitting there, waiting for his turn. He was a South Indian. Soon enough we were merrily chatting away. But when I told him that I wrote stories etc., in Hindi and that I had come to Moscow to translate books into Hindi, he lost all interest in me and virtually turned his back towards me. Those were the days when a Tamilian had immolated himself in protest against the imposition of Hindi. I had a similar experience a few years later in India. I was travelling in a train towards Visakhapatnam to attend a camp for local Hindi students. A gentleman, a government officer, belonging to those areas, was also travelling in the same compartment. When I told him about the purpose of my visit to Visakhapatnam, he frowned hard at me and said, "You have come all the way to teach Hindi to our people? Have you nothing better to do?" and likewise, became cold and indifferent to me.

And I had an even more chilling experience in Lucknow some years ago, where I had gone to receive a small award. A move was afoot in those days to introduce Urdu as the second language in U.P. schools. In the office of the Awards Committee, I heard someone say angrily, "Why, introducing Urdu will mean another partition of the country, another Pakistan is in the offing."

That is how attitudes have been hardening. It is not only that efforts were made to put one language in a dominant position over others, damage was and is still being done by linking language with religion. Even a few months ago, at a seminar for the promotion of Urdu, held in Delhi, exhortations were made by speaker after speaker that Urdu should be given its rightful place as the language of the Muslim minority.

Now, I welcome the idea of Urdu being given its rightful place,

but I resent its being labelled as a minority language.

Urdu is not the language of a religious minority. It is one of the great Indian language, a part of our rich cultural heritage like any other Indian languages. It is one of the precious gifts of our history to us. It has produced some of the world's finest literature which we all cherish, and it is a language in which creative work has been done as much by Muslim writers as by non-Muslim writers, in much the same way as literary works in Hindi have been and are being written by non-Hindu writers. Premchand wrote remarkably well both in Urdu and Hindi and is regarded as the Father of Urdu fiction as much as of the Hindi novel. Raghupati Sahai Firaq was one of the luminaries of Urdu poetry. And there are any number of Muslim writers writing in Hindi, who have enriched Hindi literature. A few years ago, we all saw the *Mahabharat* on the TV screen. All its dialogues had been written by the late Rahi Masum Raza, a Muslim by birth and faith, but an eminent Hindi writer. When someone asked him how, being a Muslim, he had managed to write such remarkable dialogues, his simple reply was, "Why, 'Mahabharat' is as much my cultural heritage as of anyone else."

A few years ago I saw a dance performance in one of the towns of Orissa, depicting the different incarnations of the god Vishnu. During the entire performance, lasting many hours, the expository verses were sung by a young singer. When, later, I was introduced to him, I learnt that the singer was a Muslim.

❖ If you have had occasion to see the television version of my novel *Tamas*, you must have noticed that in one scene, when the riots have broken out and the fires are raging, a small group of Muslim singers wishing to enter a gurudwara find the doors of the gurudwara closed. They are at their wits' end and do not know which way to turn. They are Muslim minstrels who traditionally sing in gurudwaras, but with the fires of communal hatred raging, the doors of the gurudwara are closed to them.

The atmosphere, by now, has been considerably vitiated.

It is not languages alone that have come down to us as our rich cultural heritage, it is the entire body of values, values of a rich, composite culture that we have inherited from our past and that forms the sheet-anchor of our life.

There has been a period in our history, a golden period to my mind, when interaction among people professing different faiths, at all levels, took the form of a powerful movement, spurred by the teachings of the Bhakta and Sufi saint poets. This was, to my mind,

the period of a cultural renaissance and of the emergence of this composite culture. It exercised an all-embracing influence on matters of faith, on social institutions, on our outlook on life, on literature, on our languages and a lot else. It was a radical period in the thought life of our country and brought about a synthesis in matters of religious belief. Starting from its faith in one omnipresent invisible God, it upheld the concept of the equality of all human beings, it denounced the caste system, and it preached the gospel of love, love of God, love of all mankind, love as the principle of life.

Of course, our history has been such that, since times immemorial, traders, travellers, invaders, pilgrims, darvishes have been coming from far and near, and many of them chose to make India their home, and in course of time, merged their identities with the overall identity of the Indian people. But the Bhakti period of the middle ages was unique, in that a powerful cultural upsurge, with a distinct sense of direction, took place, breaking caste and religious barriers and imparted the ethos of a composite culture.

When Kabir sang:

एक रूप सन माहीं
एक ही त्वचा रुधिर पुनि एक ही
विप्र शूद्र के माहीं।

'All human beings are alike.
All have the same skin,
The same blood courses through their veins
Whether they are Brahmins or Sudras!'

or when he says:

एक निरंजन अल्लाह मेरा
हिंदु, तुर्क दुही नहीं मेरा

I do not have to dilate on the character and contribution of this powerful movement which spread for nearly three hundred years through the length and breadth of India. Verses of Kabir, Nanak, Raidas and many others are on the lips of millions of our people. It is noteworthy that Guru Nanak appointed Mardana, a Muslim as his chief disciple. Our saint poets, as we call them, had all come from the

lower strata of society - Kabir, a weaver, Raidas a 'chamar' and so on, but they had the courage of conviction to challenge orthodoxy, both Hindu and Muslim orthodoxy, to speak of the equality of man and oppose all caste barriers. An intellectual ferment was taking place. It was during this period that Dara Shikoh an ardent admirer of Hindu scriptures, who had translated quite a few Upanishads and other texts, wrote his famous treatise, *Majma ul Bahrain* (The Confluence of Two Oceans) emphasizing the similarities in the concept of God between the Hindu and the Muslim scriptures. 'I regard the Upanishads', Dara Shikoh used to say, 'as the ocean of monotheism'. Ironically enough, it was this book which Aurangzeb, his fanatic brother, used as a pretext to get Dara executed. It was a period of cultural fusion inspired by the concept of one God and the equality of mankind.

A sufi poet from the Panjab, the famous Bulley Shah in one of his verses exclaims:

बुल्लिया, तैनु काफर काफर आखरे
तू आहो, आहो आख!

Bulley Shah, you are being dubbed a 'kafir' by the people,
His reply was: Go and tell them, yes, I am one, I am a 'kaffir'!

There is a throb of sincerity and human warmth about such verses, which are an eloquent testimony to the eager desire for cultural fusion at that time.

Kabir was one of the tallest men of that age. Bold and fearless, he had the courage of his convictions to challenge orthodoxy in its own citadel of Benares. I am sometimes tempted to think that there is something symbolical about the uncertainty that prevails about his birth, whether he was a Hindu or a Muslim by birth. The prompting behind this uncertainty seems to be that he should not be looked upon as a Hindu or a Muslim, that his identity as a Hindu or a Muslim should remain undefined. Thus, the question of his birth recedes into the background and his teachings receive eager acceptance from both Hindus and Muslims.

Why is it that this period in our history is not highlighted the way it should be? Efforts are made to portray these saint poets as metaphysical poets, the vital social stance in their writings is deliberately sidelined, underplayed. They are presented only as seekers of union with the Infinite.

But how down to earth Kabir was when he exclaimed loudly enough:

कविरा खड़ा बाजार में
 लिये लुकाड़ी हाथ
 जो घर फूँके आपनो
 चले हमारे साथ।

Here, in the market place stands Kabir,
 a burning wand in his hand.
 Let him who has the courage to set his own house on fire,
 come along and be one of us!

It was, to my mind, this period which shaped the contours of our composite culture. Through large-scale interaction, as much at the level of thought and belief as at the social level, it gave us a liberal, tolerant, democratic outlook, imbued with the spirit of accommodation and love for our fellow-beings. It was under this pervasive influence that our people have lived through the centuries as peaceful neighbours. It was this period which gave us our present-day languages and a treasure-house of immortal literature. It is from this period of rich, pluralistic culture that we draw sustenance and inspiration for our struggle against bigotry and orthodoxy to-day.

This struggle has been a perpetual affair. The saint poets and sufi darveshes and their followers faced it during their own life-time. If Dara Shukoh raised his voice in support of this fusion of beliefs, there was Aurangzeb to stifle his voice and get him killed. The saving grace is that this composite culture has withstood these onslaughts and millions of our countrymen continue to have infinite faith in it. It has become integral to their mind-set.

We know well enough how time and again narrow vested interests, orthodoxy and the ruling oligarchies have worked hard to undermine and disrupt this pluralistic culture, and drive a wedge among the communities, and sow seeds of discord and hatred among them. With the British rulers, this was an integral part of their policy. Lord Hardinge, one of the British viceroys was candid enough when he wrote to Sir Harcourt Butler in 1926:

When the day of religious peace arrives in India, the day of our departure from these shores will draw nigh.

The imperialist regime did not create the divide, but it had a vital

stake in exploiting the differences to serve its own vested interests, and in our own times, before Independence, we have seen how this incited separatism had assumed the form of a conflagration.

I was a small boy, barely eleven years of age, when the first communal riot took place in my home-town of Rawalpindi. That was way back in 1926. It is not coincidental that Lord Hardinge wrote that letter, cited above, in 1926. The grain market of my town was set on fire and I saw, at dead of night, half the sky turn copper-red from its glow. For me, at that time it was both a dreadful and a fascinating sight. I was to learn later that between the years 1922 and 1927, a series of communal riots had taken place in different towns of India. These riots had been engineered to break the back of the first Non-Co-operation Movement launched under Gandhiji's leadership against the British government. We know well enough how everytime the anti-British struggle gained momentum, it was drowned in blood. Who can forget the great Calcutta killings of 1946 or the ghastly Noakhali killings soon after on the eve of Independence? This continued till the holocaust of 1947 and the Partition of the country.

Yet, despite such severe jolts from disruptive forces, both before and since Independence, our basic democratic polity, its pluralistic character, the goodwill among the communities and their desire to live in peace has not been vitiated and turned into hostility and blind hatred.

I would like to cite here a small example. When the Partition of the country took place, millions were uprooted and turned into homeless refugees. The scars have still not healed. Yet people, by and large, have not harboured bitterness against people on the other side of the border. They have only deplored the fact of Partition. What is significant is that some of the most sensitive, humanistic writing on the theme of Partition has been done by Punjabis, the victims of Partition, whether it was Amrita Pritam in India or Saadat Hasan Manto, on the other side of the border, in Pakistan. It reveals clearly enough how, even in the midst of that holocaust, their faith in the humanistic values of our composite culture was not shaken.

It is this vast reservoir of goodwill that still exists at the level of the common people.

But it is certainly under great strain to-day. Sinister efforts are afoot to corrode this goodwill. Every other day some ghastly incident occurs that sends waves of shock throughout the country, whether it is the pulling down of the Babri Masjid, or the burning alive of the Australian Christian missionary and his two sons or the lynching of

a Muslim divine, or the killing of innocent citizens at the hands of terrorist gangs aided and abetted by Pakistani ISI, or the cries of Jihad now heard frequently from across the border.

It is an alarming situation. The cultural sphere, which has all along been comparatively free from narrow sectarian attitudes, in which our writers, artists, media persons etc, have worked hitherto in a liberal, congenial atmosphere, is threatened with the virus of communalism. Otherwise, how can one explain that an artist of the stature and eminence of M.F. Hussain should be so harassed? Or a veteran film personality like Dilip Kumar, one of our topmost and highly respected film stars should be humiliated? There has, only recently, been an attack on SAHMAT activists in Lucknow. What sort of image of our cultural life are we projecting by such acts?

It is a menacing situation. Yet, I am convinced that it is not easy to disrupt a democratic polity which has struck roots in India. A riot takes place only when it is engineered. It is only under external provocations that communal eruptions occur. Even in our relations with Pakistan there is no dearth of goodwill at the level of the people. Besides, at a time when distances are shrinking and technology is forcing people to come closer, to create rifts and dissensions is retrogressive, it is an attempt to put the clock back.

At such a time however, my mind perforce turns to the cultural workers, and to the inspiring role that cultural organisations like the IPTA had once played. Premchand had once written that cultural workers are not the camp followers but the torch bearers of society. I am confident that they will rise to the occasion, and using all possible avenues of expression, play their laudable role in strengthening the forces of secularism. To save secularism is to save India.