

Sahitya Akademi Fellowship 1985

Acceptance Speech by Shri Umashankar Joshi

I feel honoured in being elected as a Fellow of the Sahitya Akademi and am grateful to its authorities. Mine may be a unique case of having been a member of the General Council and the Executive Board of the Sahitya Akademi for twenty three out of its thirty one years of functioning till now. I was there for eighteen years since its inception till at last I retired after pleading before the Survey Committee as its member for not allowing more than two terms to an Akademi member. But again after some years I was elected to a responsible post for a term of five years. Today I find how intimate and graceful a tie is to bind me with this august body for the rest of my days.

Let me in passing observe that even for those writers and teachers who want to remain away from the political arena, it would not be possible to shirk the responsibility of sharing the burden of running Literary and Cultural Institutions and Universities if for no other reason than at least to ensure that they are run in a democratic manner and that no government can dare dominate those bodies. Such persons would be more than lucky if they learnt how to be with, and not of, the establishments and if teachers, never ceased to be one, if writers or poets, jealously cherished the word as 'the bud of a flame' in the sanctum sanctorum within. I must confess that it would not have been possible for me to be a writer in the absence of my getting intimately involved in public affairs now and again — almost in spite of myself. Happily I found that my literary work was going on all through in the backyard of the mind.

What does it mean to be a writer or a poet in one of the national languages of our ancient yet new-born, or as Robert Frost once having described it as such chose to redescribe, 're-born' India? What does it mean to be a poet in India in 1985 or, to be more specific in the case of the present speaker, during the long decades of this uncertain century?

I should think it was indeed propitious for me to have been nursed on the fairs and festivals held at the southern foot-hills of the Aravalli range. I recall having received a bronze peace-medal as a schoolboy after the First World War ended. To have joined the freedom struggle and been in jails reminded one of 'Bliss it was to be alive in that dawn / But to be young was very heaven.' To have felt, even from a distance, the untold horrors of the Second World War culminating in Hiroshima was nightmarish enough. To have visualized, however feebly, the anxiety and existential anguish of the nuclear age and at home to have been living through the exultation of having been free from foreign yoke, the ensuing disillusionment and frustration, the letting down of the disadvantaged millions by the privileged ones, the corroding corruption, a kind of gradual atrophy of the moral sense — all this, rarely shot through with a truant ray of hope, mounted up to a challenge too big for any artist to cope easily with. No wonder if he sometimes felt alienated and his sense of roots was shaken.

The poet while all others are engaged in some useful activity or the other, appears to be playing, just playing with the word or, rather words. Think of a man like Rabindranath, the white-bearded sage, again and again getting lost in the play with words or line and colour or musical notes. The word, I referred to a couple of minutes ago as 'the bud of a flame'. The image is from a modern Western poet. Our ancients talked of 'Shabdākhyā Jyotiḥ' — the light that goes by the name 'Word'. The word illuminates this world, makes the real world accessible to our sight. The word worlds. The poet in his play with the word goes on building up a discourse. With the take-off he has already shuffled off his 'ego'. It is his self, the creative self, which is working on the discourse and also reacts to it, possibly both mutually creating each other or shall we say playing with each other. It would be one of the myriad avatars of his creative self, that lie within the range of possibility for him to assume. The word enables the poet to tap the immense potentialities open to him. The discourse he produces with words helps us also in jumping out of our ego-shell effortlessly as it were and incarnating one of the numberless possible selves that it has opened out for us.

Though the sentence is the unit of a discourse, the total discourse is itself as well-knit as a sentence and has a unity. Our Achāryas wisely describe this unity on which Aristotle rightly insists as 'ekavākyaṭā', one-sentence-ness. The Mahabharata as a poem though running into a hundred thousand stanzas is for them 'one sentence'. Even though each artistic creation is a closed discourse and appears autonomous, the poems, plays and novels by the same author would tend to point to a kind of ekavākyaṭā, a unity,

the variety of creative selves in the various works being like photographs of the same person, teasingly — sometimes outrageously — dissimilar and yet essentially projecting one particular person. It could be the unity of 'tone', to borrow a term from music. Such common ground in one's total work is referred to by Heidegger as 'site'.

How would I locate my site? Of the three decennial Satyagraha movements (those of 1920-22, 1930-32, 1941-42) that of the 'thirties' was perhaps marked by a more severe purity of means and purpose. We were lifted on the crest of a mighty tidal wave of patriotism and felt as if we had only to stretch our hand to pluck the very stars. During the Gandhi-Irvin Pact period in 1931 I published a long poem called nothing less than 'Vishva Shanti'. The first section opened dramatically: 'There from afar comes the blissful word, / Resounding the long-silent domes of centuries / Arrives the life-giving word.' Then follows the vision of the Earth in the firmament, a pilgrim of light, with cooling snows on her limbs and lava rumbling within, with her children not satisfied with the milk she provides trying to thrive on one another's blood. The Earth patiently trudges on for light, more light. ... There arrives the blissful word: 'Do not kill the evil-doer along with the evil.' Rarely it is headed. But once again it has burst upon the Earth.

Ever since then, my eyes have been riveted on that spark in the cosmos, our dear Earth, a pilgrim of light, in fact, on the uncertain fate of mankind that inhabits it, on something which is always in a flux because of the ever changing existential situation. That uncertainty has during half a century ripened into a grim deathwish on the part of humankind that seems bent upon using every ounce of energy at its disposal to fulfilling it through a global nuclear holocaust. Another suicidal variant of violence that is surfacing as an international feature in 1985 is that of terrorism. Five years ago more than fifty Nobel Laureates including some modernist writers appealed to mankind to save itself from self-annihilation if need be by resorting to Gandhi's way. Concern with the roots of violence, concern in not just homo sapiens but man, at once human and humane — that turned out gradually to be my 'site'. Or so it seems to me.

The three decennial Satyagraha movements and the early 'sixties and 'seventies witnessed fresh blossoming of literary talent in our languages. It would be highly rewarding, I am sure, to locate the sites of various contemporary writers in our languages.

While I should be second to none in appropriating, and benefiting from, the gifts of the mind that the modern media so bountifully reach us, I would not like them to make me miss the validity of my lived experience. There is still a tortuous hangover of colonialism which makes us look elsewhere rather than within ourselves for self-confidence. The colonial mind behaves as if it were annexed, colonial existence revels in remaining secondhand existence. The colonial spirit lies in the need for having to justify one's ideas, achievements, ways of behaviour etc. solely in terms of the norms set by the overbearing agency. There must be something wrong with us if, for example, we have to have great artists like Sir Richard Attenborough and Peter Brook to make us turn to Gandhi and the Mahabharata with confidence.

The other alarming factor is our narcissism. If at one end there is abject surrender, at the other there is utter self-engrossment. Can we have a little less of narcissism in the fields of literature and education at the highest level of study at least? It is time our post-graduate course in any Indian language developed into a kind of a course in Comparative Indian Literature. The Sahitya Akademi can take an initiative in promoting this aspect by holding meetings of Heads of Departments of Languages with the help of the UGC and plan to make translations available to the Departments in cooperation with the National Book Trust and the Hindi Departments in the non-Hindi speaking States. Something can be done at the secondary level also. I was thrilled to see a Gujarati Higher Secondary Text Book carry half a dozen poems and prose-pieces from other Indian languages. Literary narcissism may prove as dangerous as cultural colonialism. Only genuine poetic discourse can save us from both.

Thank you, Mr. President, for giving me an opportunity to share a sense of fellowship with the fraternity of writers this evening.

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