

Review in Depth

Revolution-in-Narration: The Idea of Revolution in the Hindi Novel

KRANTIKA VICHAR AUR HINDI UPANYAS:
AJNEYA, YASHPAL AUR RENU KA VISHISHTA SANDARBHA

by Prem Singh,

Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, 2000, xiii +219 pp. Rs. 300

"... Ab tak kya kiya / Jivan kya jia /
Zyada lia aur dia bahut-bahut kam/
Mar gaya desh, arey, jivit raha gaye
tum ..." (What have you done so far/
What life have you lived/ You have
taken much and given very little/ The
country died, but you survived ...)
Muktibodh - "Andhere Mein"

In this age of gross consumerism and the much-trumpeted triumph of multinational capitalism, when the west-sponsored theory has already declared the 'death' of so many long celebrated ideas of 'History', 'Ideology' and 'the social', and a text has become only a field of playful signifiers signifying 'no(thing)' - the very idea of writing a critical discourse on the 'textuality' of revolution in the modern Hindi novel is, in itself, an act of resistance. The relationship between revolution and ideas has always presented a proverbial chicken-and-egg problem for the social scientists and literary critics alike. All major revolutions of the world (i.e., the Glorious Revolution, the American Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, the French Revolution, the Revolution of 1848, the Russian Revolution and the latest Infotech Revolution) not only attempted to radically alter the status-quo, but also generated a host of new ideas about the people and their problems - the social, political, cultural, economic and environmental aspects of their existence.

Consequently, these new ideas inspired many a great writer and artist and they harnessed these 'revolutionary' ideas (about self, existence, society, nation, God and faith) in the making of their civilisationally significant texts. It is in this context that Prem Singh interrelates and critically analyses the impact of the "ideas of revolution" (largely within the domain of the Marxist-Existentialist framework) and the construction of three very significant modern Hindi novels, namely, *Shekhar: Ek Jivani*, *Dada Comrade* and *Maila Anchal*. His readings of these novels reveal how the existential notion of revolution, as reflected in some of the 'modernist' novels like *Shekhar: Ek Jivani*, is too 'self-centred' to include the socio-political-historical contexts of the day. On the other hand, the novel inspired by the Marxist or socialist notion of

revolution like *Maila Anchal* display a rebellion or a protest and are deeply embedded in the social, economic, political, cultural and the historical contexts. Though the term 'freedom' is quite central to both the Existential and the Marxist frameworks, it becomes assertedly 'self or individual-centric' in the former and pronouncedly 'people-centric' in the latter.

The three novelists, Ajneya, Yashpal and Phanishwaranath Renu, whose novels Prem Singh examines in the book under review, were themselves revolutionary actors in the grand theatre of the Indian freedom struggle. Both Ajneya and Yashpal were the active members of the revolutionary outfit "Hindustan Socialist Republic Association" which was being led by such eminent personalities as Chandrashekhar Azad, Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev, Rajguru, Bhagawatcharana Vohra and Ashfaqulla Khan. Moreover, the titles of both the debut novels (which were published in 1941) *Shekhar: Ek Jivani* and *Dada Comrade* derive from Chandrashekhar Azad. No less revolutionary was Renu's career. He fought against oppression and exploitation throughout his life. He actively participated in the 1942 Quit-India movement. In 1950, he crossed over to Nepal and helped the people organise an armed as well as political struggle against the despotic Ranashahi regime. *Maila Anchal*, his debut novel, was published in 1954. Renu, like Ajneya, was a close associate of JP and was one of those writers who were persecuted because of their principled opposition to the Emergency. Hence the rationale behind Prem Singh's selection of the trinity and the treatment of the ideas of revolution in their political novels. Prem Singh divides the study into four chapters. The first chapter is 'Introduction' (pp. 1-20) and the remaining three chapters focus on the three above-mentioned novels respectively. In his 'Introduction,' he sets out to analyse the logic of his project and the handling of the ideas of revolution in the Hindi novel in its pre-modern and modern avatars. He relates the evolution of the idea of revolution, which, inter alia, signifies a radical transformation in the existing socio-political-cultural order, to the European

Renaissance and the Enlightenment project. The American (1775-1781), the French (1789) and the Russian (1917) revolutions engendered different epistemologies or languages of protest and resistance which stirred and inspired the political as well as the creative energies of the people all over the world. The non-conformist thoughts of Hegel, Marx, Darwin, Nietzsche and Freud had a tremendous impact on the intellectuals and leaders alike in the late 19th and 20th century. Prem Singh rightly refers to George Gissing's *Workers in the Dawn* (1880), Morris' *News from Nowhere* (1890), Jack London's *The Iron Wheel* (1907), Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907) and *Under Western Eyes* (1911), Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four* (1949), Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* (1940), Silone's *Fontamara* (1930) and *Bread and Wine* (1955), and Malraux's *The last Hope* (1933) to show the obvious impact of the new non-conformist ideas on the English and European novel. He could have also included Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), which was inspired by the French Revolution.

In the context of India, the revolt of 1857 was the most intense and momentous expression of a popular revolution to seize power from the mighty colonial rule, which, having been brutally suppressed, ended in a failure. The contemporary Marxist historians belittle it as an ill-organised mutiny engineered by a decaying feudal order, but they do not see the wood for the trees as the revolt involved not only the creamy layer of feudal nobility, but also the peasantry, the real subalterns of the Indian Society. Though the political geography of the 1857 revolt was limited to largely Hindi-speaking area of north India, its psychological impact on the people and their 'structure of feeling' was, indeed, immense. Prem Singh here refers to Ram Vilas Sharma who in his brilliant study *Bharat Mein Angrezi Raj Aur Marxvad* (1982) underlines the significance of the 1857 revolt for the subsequent growth of nationalism in colonial India. It is somewhat puzzling to a modern reader as to why the Indian middle-class of the revolt-period, including the writers in native languages, remained apathetic to the cause of the revolt and sometimes even sided with the British authorities. Of the contemporary poets, only Mirza Asadullah Ghalib (1797-1869) in his diary, *Dastanbu* (1857), confronted and described the turbulent times of the revolt. Ironically, most of the rulers of the princely states helped the British to stifle the revolt and almost all the major writers of the nineteenth century, including even those who were responsible for the growth of patriotic literature, articulated their loyalty to the British.

It would not be out of place here to

mention that the first ever intense expression of patriotism and hatred for the British rule in fiction with a convincing description of many futuristic armed uprisings against it was recorded not in any Indian language but in English. *A Journal of Forty-Eight Hours of the Year 1945* by Kylas Chunder Dutt published in Capt D.L. Richardson's *The Calcutta Literary Gazette* may justifiably be said to foreshadow the violent revolt of 1857. It is worthwhile to remember here that while the great tradition of literature might have ignored the event, the little tradition of literature, i.e., the folk-songs, faithfully recorded the 'structure of feeling' of the Indian masses. P.C. Joshi has painstakingly compiled and edited these folk-songs in Hindi, Awadhi, Braj, Urdu, Bhojpuri, Bundelkhandi and other dialects, which were in currency during and just after the 1857 revolt, in his famous book - *1857 in Folk Songs* (1994). The first three Hindi novels, *Devrani-Jethani Ki Kahani* (1870) by Gauridutt, *Bhagyavati* (1877) by Shradhdharam Phillauri and *Pariksha Guru* (1882) by Lala Shrinivas Das are not even remotely concerned with the 1857 revolt or the revolutionary ideas. The attitude of one of the makers of modern Hindi literature, Bharatendu Harishchandra, was also, much like Bankim, ambiguous towards the British.

Prem Singh highlights the fact that the first Hindi novel on the theme of the 1857 revolt named *Ghadar* was written by Rishabhcharana Jain as late as in 1930. Some other notable efforts to tabulate the revolt include Vrindavanlal Verma's *Jhansi Ki Rani Lakshmibai* (1946), Pratapnarayana Shrivastava's *Bekasi Ka Mazar* (1956), Kamalakant Tripathi's *Pahigar* (1991) and Rajiv Saxena's *Ramaini* (1998). Premchand, the father of the social-problem Hindi novel, only created one feudal-revolutionary character, Veerpal Singh, in his *Rangabhumi* (1924). Other early Hindi-political novels worth mentioning include Premchand's *Premashram* (1922), Bhagawatcharana Verma's *Terhe Merhe Raste* (1946) and Ilachandra Joshi's *Muktipath* (1949). The influence of such Indian thinker-activists as Vivekananda, Tagore, Aurobindo Ghosh, Gandhi, M.N. Roy, Lohia and Jayaprakash Narayan has been profound on the development of the Hindi political novel. It is in this context that Prem Singh brings in the justly famous trio of the Hindi novel for critical analysis.

In the chapter 'Shekhar: Ek Jivani Mein Kranti Ka Vichar' (pp. 22-106), Prem Singh critically examines how far Ajneya succeeds or fails in weaving the ideas of revolution in the matrix of the novel. Prof Singh also minutely dissects the nature of Ajneya's controversial rebel-hero, Shekhar (who, as Ajneya himself tells us, is a

part of his own 'self'), and points out that the narrative, its inherent revolutionary potential notwithstanding, peters out in a paranoiac parquetry, mainly because of Shekhar's (read Ajneya's) obsession with 'atmarati' or excessive narcissism. The 'inner revolt' of Shekhar ill-matches with the socio-political context of the novel. The novel, as the novelist tells us in his 'Preface,' is an attempt to record "the intense agony of a nocturnal vision" that he experienced in his solitary confinement in a prison in 1933. It took Ajneya full ten years to re-construct that vision in two volumes of *Shekhar: Ek Jivani* published in 1941 and 1944 respectively. Ajneya did write the third part of the novel but refused to publish it. The political ecology of the novel, i.e., the politico-historical context, involves such events of tremendous significance as the Non-Cooperation movement, the Quit India movement and the growth of Revolutionary terrorism – all geared to throw off the foreign yoke. But the central question of India's freedom pales into insignificance before Shekhar's 'existential' and 'sexual' freedom. Prem Singh has aptly explored the influence of T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, Sigmund Freud, D.H. Lawrence and M.N. Roy in the making and manipulation of the hero, Shekhar, in the narrative. An Indian reader can't possibly be amused by descriptions of 'illicit' sexual relationship between brother (Shekhar) and his sister (Shashi). Both of them desire a brave new world in which the opposite sexes may find absolute or even anarchic freedom far and even much farther from "the madding crowd's ignoble strife." Despite all his bravado of 'equality' and 'freedom,' Shekhar psychologically exploits all the four women he comes in close contact with – Saraswati (his real sister), Shashi (his cousin), Sharada (his friend) and Atti, the housemaid. Even when he is saved by a street woman from committing suicide, all that our 'revolutionary' hero immediately thinks is that she, though young, was not a beautiful woman! Similarly, his visit to a brothel fails to arouse the latent revolutionary in him. Shashi's father-in-law, though crudely but quite tellingly, blasts Shekhar's pretensions of being a revolutionary: "This is the vagabond who pretends to be a communist ... communists consider women the sharable commodities. Atheists! Their main business is to misguide the young girls and make whores of them in the name of reform ... First sister, then comrade, and then a whore!" (*Shekhar*, vol. 2, p 180). Moreover, Shekhar shows typically bourgeois apathy to the poor and the oppressed. His concern for educating the Dalits seems to be too cosmetic to be convincing. Thus, Prem Singh cogently argues that the narrative, despite Ajneya's claims

for it as an image of the zeitgeist, falls flat in face of the realities of the turbulent times.

The next chapter focuses on the treatment of the ideas of revolution in Yashpal's *Dada Comrade* (pp. 107-143), which is an attempt to fictionalise the revised agenda of socialism for the agents of the revolution engaged in India's freedom struggle. Yashpal is regarded as a Marxist-communist writer in the Hindi literary historiography. The fact that most of the revolutionaries embraced Communist Party during their career enables Yashpal to use the novel as propaganda for the Marxist revolution. After his release from the jail in 1938 (he was arrested in 1932 at Allahabad), he started writing novels to disseminate the Marxist ideals. His major novels include *Dada Comrade* (1941), *Deshdrohi* (1942), *Party Comrade* (1946), *Jhootha Sach* (2 parts, 1958, 1960) and *Meri Teri Usaki Bat* (1974).

Prem Singh reads *Dada Comrade* as a sequel or a rejoinder (or even a parody of) to Ajneya's *Shekhar: Ek Jivani*. The sub-text of the story is also partially autobiographical. When Yashpal was working with Chandrashekhar Azad, Bhagawatcharana Vohra, Rajguru, Ajneya and others, he was charged with misusing the party-funds and oversocialising with women. There was a possibility of his liquidation, as per norms of the underground outfits, but Azad sent him far on a different mission in order to marginalise him. Hence, Azad's representation as 'dada' in the novel. *Dada Comrade* may profitably be read as an apology in defence of Yashpal's personal attitude and approach to a Marxist revolution which did not tally with his party's agenda. The novel deals with the question of moral and political revolution through the interpersonal relationships and actions of Harish and Shail. Harish, a young revolutionary, much like Shekhar, is a chronic case of megalomania and self-obsession. Shail, the upper middle class, liberated, westernised revolutionary-heroine serves as a foil to Harish and Robert in the story. Harish, Shail and Robert deliberate at length on the issue of women's liberation which forms the major point-of-view of the novel. The entire discourse makes a fervent plea for 'free sex' without undesirable obstacles like marriage. Marriage and children do, as the discussion suggests, enslave women, rendering them incapable of any revolution. Contraception has been hailed as a blessing to enjoy sex without its consequence (i.e., children). Prem Singh rightly criticises this approach to life: "As a matter of fact, Yashpal recommends Freudian sexual-psychology under the camouflage of new, radical morality" (p 118). Shekhar as well as Harish do

not crave for peasants and the dalits as revolutionary-comrades. They need young, attractive, westernised "dolls," whom they revolutionise into "sleeping partners!" Harish exploits Shail, Yashoda and Nancy after feeding them with the dreams of revolution. Yashpal makes his heroine, Shail, outsex Shashi (Ajneya's heroine in *Shekhar*). Harish, like a dominant male, relishes Shail's nakedness and starts addressing Nancy as his 'sister' once she refuses to strip herself naked before him. On the political front also, Harish singlehandedly decides to implement the Gandhian-Congress-national movement on the pattern of Russian socialism. The arm-chair socialist, Robert, is his confidante who eventually betrays the workers' cause. Harish becomes Sultan in order to continue the strike, though it is dada's monetary contribution that makes it successful. Harish's revolutionary experiment succeeds – Is Yashpal supporting the bourgeois leadership of a revolutionary movement? The novelist labels Gandhi's role as a "fraud", "unknowable riddle", "non-violent dictatorship", etc., without even once pausing to ponder over the factors that 'massified' the national freedom struggle. Thus, Prem Singh argues that both the novels – Ajneya's *Shekhar* and Yashpal's *Dada Comrade* – promise much but deliver little by way of being political novels.

In the last chapter, Prem Singh analyses Renu's *Maila Anchal* (1954) which, according to him, offers a far more reliable picture of a struggling India in which the horizontal spread of political consciousness uneasily co-exists with appalling poverty, illiteracy, caste and communal violence, lack of proper development and an all pervasive corruption. The region, Maryganj, a village in Purnia district in Bihar, becomes the nation-in-microcosm. The social semiotics of the title itself suggests, metonymically, the archetypal image of Mother India (the nation) whose "anchal" – Maryganj, stands sullied. It has to be asserted here that Renu does not 'exoticise' the rural and lament for the loss of its pristine innocence. To a rural worker like Dr Prashant, who is basically an urbanite in the novel, the real (or the Mother) India may be located in the villages because it is from here that the project of the national-reconstruction should have begun in India. *Maila Anchal* is not a self-reflexive, narcissistic narrative a la *Shekhar: Ek Jivani* and *Dada Comrade*. This novel is an example of the nation-in-narration which foregrounds the stories of the lowest sections of Indian society as they are pitted against the dominant structures of power. See the social stratification of the Maryganj: the Kayasth toli, the Rajput toli, the Brahman toli and the Yadav toli

constitute the dominant power, whereas the chamars, the kurmis, the gwalas, the pariah santhals, the dhanuks and the doms make the 'subalterns' or the margins of the social hierarchy. Renu's other novels, largely inspired by the Gandhi-Lohiaite vision, such as *Parati Parikatha*, *Dirghatapa*, *Julus*, and *Kitane Chaurahay* also condemn the inhumane caste-class-communal power-structures without being either self-reflexive or propagandistic. *Maila Anchal*, like his other novels, is free from any revolutionary or political dogma; its politics is the politics of the people in which the narrator (Renu) takes the side of the underdog. Dr Prashant is shocked to see the sordid condition of Maryganj: "...to hope that the souls of these hungry and starving people would never go astray or rise in revolt is a sign of stupidity. The doctor is stunned to see the poverty and misery of this place. How great is that contentment which keeps them alive? After all, what is that stern law which has disciplined these thousands of poverty-ridden people?" (p 183). This is the point-of-view of the novelist. Because of the fear of the colonial oppression, the villagers cannot even recall the real name of their village, as Maryganj, its present name, is given by Martin sahib. Renu deftly underplays the collective amnesia of the 'Indians' who are afraid of recalling the old name, Bharat. Sociologically, *Maila Anchal* is a sequel to Premchand's *Godan*. There is an absolute lack of education or literacy in the village; only Kamali among the women and a handful of the young men, all coming from the families of the rural elite, can read and write. In the absence of literacy, the villagers are frequently deputed by the crafty Vishvanath Prasad and other powerful Rajputs, Yadavas and the Brahmanas.

The three village radicals, namely, Baldeo, Bawandas (both Gandhian activists) and Kalicharan (the socialist) reflect how the mainstream national politics was transforming the political agency of rural India. There are illicit sexual relationships in the text, but all of them are grounded in the matrix of power relations in the village. No effort has been made by the novelist to anchor these cases of sexual incontinence to the grand narrative of women's liberation or lofty ideas of a free society. The plight of the rural women is embodied in the characters of Kamali, Lachhami, Phulia, Mangaladevi and the unnamed raped Santhal women. The novel juxtaposes the moral-spiritual decay of the city and the country, only to suggest that the right way to translate Gandhi's swaraj into reality lies in and through self-purification. Because of the unprincipled politics, Baldeo gets corrupted, Bawandas brutally