

The Literary Festivals of the Elites of Newly Emerged Class of Neo-Liberalism!

-Viraji

In recent months the country witnessed a hectic activity of literary festivals – The Jaipur Literature Festival (JLF), Kerala Literature Festival (KLF) and The Hindu Lit for Life. All these three festivals were ‘powered by’, ‘Associate Partnered’ with and ‘partnered’ with, big wealthy corporations besides the public sector undertakings like LIC, SBI and others. These festivals were promoted with much hype with the particular attention to draw the leading youth of the country. The Hindu even took an initiative to reach out to general public of Chennai city by way of a moving mobile library and reading zones at Chennai metro stations.

Though there is scarce information about the JLF and KLF, the details of the Hindu Lit Fest are reported, enabling us to have an understanding about the nature and content of these literary festivals.

Presently we are living in the age of the rule of the political and economic policies of “neo-liberalism” which claims that there is no alternative to its policies and believes in its moral superiority. It spread economic philosophy of ruling classes throughout the world as the leading economic philosophy. Whatever may be its claims of ‘global development’ and ‘progress’ and its so-called virtues, it had not only heightened inequalities throughout the world but also created social tensions, leading to the rise of far-right leaders, organisations and parties in many countries. The core of the policies of neo-liberalism is the idea of maximum individual and minimum state. For its personal autonomy, individual rights, equality and property ownership are sacrosanct.

With such policies neo-liberalism also spread its own cultural philosophy and ethics throughout the world that are convenient to further the economic goals and interests of looting super profits by inhumanly and viciously exploiting all the natural and human resources of the globe – the collective property of entire humanity.

In our country with the implementation of neo-liberal economic policies with excessive zeal for the past four decades and the penetration of IT based service industry and its spread to towns, a new class – elite upper middle class – has emerged. The neo liberal philosophy of individual (personal) advancement and ideas of careerism at any cost inducted into the minds of this newly emerged class has been spreading its roots in the minds of the youth of this country. Added to this the ideas of so-called self-expression and gaining space, promoted by the capitalist enterprise social media platforms and so-called

online platforms for expression like twitter, youtube etc have fully occupied the minds of our middle-class youth.

Tailored tastefulness, social media political correctness, networking in the right circles became the norm of today in the literary culture of today, which is not producing the real writer of genius. The cult of genius is being replaced by that of celebrity.

Neoliberal production of the “man of culture” with its promotion of post-modern, subaltern and post-truth theories and ideas with a mistaken modernism created an artistic vacuum in the literary field also.

The present-day reality in India is heightened inequality, gross unemployment, lack of food of sustenance, lack of means of livelihood, displacement and dispossession of vulnerable sections of the people. Ever increasing and spiraling prices of essential commodities, state repression and the oppression by the mighty are the challenges faced by the common man.

But unwilling to confront the reality, the mainstream literature and writers including the celebrity have taken up the strands of neo-liberalism promoted subjectivity as their philosophy bracing surrealism, fantasy, expressionism, identity politics and violence for their writings – which presently are ruling the literary world.

Added to this, the mainstream writers in the literary world of India are reviving the religious rituals and superstitions of the old feudal ages, in the name of tradition or erstwhile ethnic customs and culture – projecting it as a literary creation.

Even the people of Centre, left and democratic politics are encouraging the literary creation based on identity subaltern, post-modern and post-truth outlook in the name of understanding the experiences of that particular sections of people and popularizing it as progressive literature. Writers of these streams of thought are being elevated as the best writers often presenting them with ‘prestigious’ awards like Sahitya Academy Awards etc, sponsored by the State.

These writers of the above streams of thought and ideas, who are bracing fantasy, surrealism and expressionism are being presented with international literary awards like Man Booker Prize etc, to the writers belonging to developing Asian and African countries.

There are two aspects in awarding these international literary awards. First these writers do not question or challenge the neo-liberal political, economic and social system that has been ruling the entire world and the sole cause of misery, plight and distress of the people around the world. These writings merely express certain discontents and wish that those discontents be resolved within the framework of the existing system without overthrowing it. Secondly, the neo-liberal publishing industry wants to expand its markets and earn super profits, into the markets of Asian and African countries, by wooing the readers through awarding the writers of these countries. Even the part played by the

publishers and the marketing promoters of particular books too plays a key role in awarding those writers.

Thus, the neo-liberalism creates the literary celebrities, who are not harmful to the existing, established system of rule.

In this background we have to understand the nature and content of these literary festivals.

No doubt the HINDU LIT FEST provenly announced that “the contours of curation rests solidly on certain aspects as our belief in the freedom of speech and expressions”, but it promised that (in the festival) “one can celebrate words and ideas, debate and discuss and bring together bibliophiles” and that the literary fest will bring back “the thrill of the spoken word”; claiming that the festival aims to connect literature to the masses and reflect the spirit of time. It also promised that various personalities participate in the festival would not only seek to not to just inform but also entertain with their thought and work.

In reality, Mr. Gaur Gopal Das, a motivational coach, who chose to become a monk because he realised that he felt fulfilled by working with the lives of people, who wrote a latest book, ‘Energize Your Mind’ used the analogies from the movie ‘Titanic’ to deal with life problems in his conversations. It is unknown with which people and lives he worked with and what were the problems and the causes and how they were resolved. Such has been the ambiguity of the motivational coach, who claims to have felt fulfilled.

Air Deccan founder G.R.Gopinath, who had written his latest book ‘Our India’ seems to have spurred a spirited discussion on the political and economic realities of the country today. But it is unknown what are those realities. But it is reported that a senior journalist Sushila Ravindranath said that “although we talk about government not interfering and letting the entrepreneur do what they want, no country can survive without government help. This reportage does indicate that the fundamental political and economic realities of the country were really discussed or not.

It is reported that former West Bengal Governor Gopalakrishna Gandhi, answering a query on “who the common man or woman today is and where they feature in the broad question of how the state treats people”, he answered “there is a common condition which marks society. I do not know if it is a common man or woman, and the condition goes like this – it is one of puzzlement of not being clear or not being able to see the path ahead or not knowing” about the nature of our country. With such play of words, it is cleverly avoided to define the common man and woman and the class nature of the state and system of our country and how it treats the people!

Shrayana Battacharya an economist with World Bank, the author of “desperately seeking Shah Rukh”, who claims that “it is primarily a book about Indian women, their aspirations, their systematically undervalued labour and other socio-economic inequalities they continue to be subjected to”, proudly announces as if “what united all the woman in the book is that they want to implement and just buy a Shah Rukh movie ticket by

themselves without depending on their father/husband/brother". She states that the book is actually about gender and economics and that the actor is an entry point of research method". Such has been the, research of a 'modernist' feminist, who craves for the 'independence' of women, that could only understand the plight of women through their ability and independence of women in buying a Shah Rukh Khan movie ticket". The wonder of neo-liberal enlightenment!

K.Srilatha the author of "This kind of child. The disability story", in the festival lamented about lack of empathy with differently abled, as if the need of the hour for resolving the plight of toiling people and masses of India facing ruthless exploitation and oppression.

Wasim Akram, the Pakistani Cricketer participating in the festival called for the resumption of cricketing ties between India and Pakistan, and more people-to-people contact between the two countries; as if cricket can bridge the contacts between people of two countries.

While T.M.Krishna said the need to secure privacy by creating a safe space to think and create for, should be at the care of freedom of speech, and that the restrictions on freedom of speech and expression worstly affect the people of marginalised section of society; N.Ravi, Chairman of the Hindu group said that due to unreasonable laws, misuse of such laws, and intolerant mob and a majoritarian ideology are the threats to free speech. Thus, solidity of certain aspects of belief in the freedom of speech and expression claimed by the Hindu, proved to be vague, evasive and do not intend to face the reality – the class nature of our socio, political and economic system that curtails freedom of speech and expression.

P.Sainath said that history needs to be retold for each generation as new evidence or knowledge comes up, but rewriting should not involve inventing history. He took a dig at the government website celebrating 75 years of Indian independence for not having any quotes from freedom fighters or any mention of British Colonialism. He thus stood away from questioning or challenging the present-day fundamental realities, the real causes for misery and distress of people.

A panel of authors on "Punjab: in a fractured land" in their discussions felt that Punjab needed justice and governance and that no political party seemed interested in the welfare of the state – as if there is no want of justice, governance in other states and is adequate and that every political party in other states is interested in the welfare of the state!

The winner of international Booker Prize-2022, for her book translated into English from Hindi as 'Tomb of Sand', participating as a celebrity in the hit best author Geetanjali Shree said that "literature is about quiet and not about the hype and celebrity culture". She also spoke about how partition still feels to much of North India, although many people may not have personally experienced it. With such vague and generalized definitions about literature she enlightenes the youth.

William Dalrymple, talking about his book 'The Company Quartet' – that chronicle the story of rise and fall of East India Company said that "it was not the British government that captured parts of India in 18th century but a corporation owned by stake holders did so for profit". He also talked about East India Company resorting to take over a country using local money of Indian bankers called Jagat Seths to amass wealth and make quadruple profit. This is a method of post-truth narration, which we had already seen in the books of "Freedom at Mid-Night" and "Bhopal Gas Tragedy", which have chosen intentionally to throw the blame on the natives (locals), the victims either due to their roguery or foolishness for their defeats or losses incurred by them the country. This so-called makeover of history, could in no way change the exploitive and crude aggressive nature of British colonialism. At the most such a makeover of history may cause a false impression that parts of India captured by the British in mid-18th century was due to the debauchery of Jagat Seths, but not by the 'mighty' British colonialism.

Vidya Balan, cine actress said that "I hail from typical, Tamil Brahmin family where joining the film industry was never an option", she narrated how a big break came to her in the cinema industry as an actor. But she didn't explain how as a member of a typical Brahmin family, she was allowed to join film industry and on what basis? But as a winner and as a celebrity she seems to have been invited to the Lit fest, as an attraction to the youth participated in the Lit fest. There is no connection whatever for literature and this film actor, to appear in a so-called literary festival, other than as an on-looker.

Avijit Mukul director of "Nostalgia for the Future", said that "Modernity (in India) really began in the late 19th century but not in 1947, from adopting of ideal from the West in India". But even as on today the "modernity" and "modernism" are mistakenly understood to be mincing and aping the west particularly the Americans taking them and their perverse ideas as ideal modernity.

Translator and D.J.Aravindan said that apart from getting the meaning right, the soul of the translation lies in getting the soul of the author into Tamil (the language in to which it is translated). This is a valid and important suggestion to be kept in mind by translators.

In the end a humorous play "Dear Comana" as a satire on the publishing industry, written by Krishna Shastri Devulapalli, on the journey of a writer who undergoes several travails on his quest to get published and become famous was enacted.

The much-touted literary fest celebrations purported to be connecting literature to the masses were conducted, unwillingly to face reality of the present-day Indian issues but taking up secondary issues and conducting vague and unspecific conversations, discussions etc. – A celebration of talking without the necessary spirit of literature and people.

This Lit fest facilitated the elite upper middle class youth to hob-nob with some celebrities, to make connection, to take selfies with the celebrities – a rite of passage into the cultural eco system of neo-liberalism and to claim some space in it.

Inadequacies of various kinds of the people literary movements in creating sufficient people's literature, and taking it to the toiling masses – the real people – who are oppressed and depressed by the neo-liberalism, with unhindered inhuman exploitation, has given such an opportunity to such elite literary festivals, specifically aimed to further the business and marketing interests, to enter in to the artistic and literary vacuum and serving the purpose of neo-liberalism in moulding its own culture and literature.

The rejuvenation of people's literary movement is the needed task to counter the spread and influence of neo-liberal culture, literature and ideas!